

“WHEN YOU WANT SOMETHING SO BAD, YOU CAN ALWAYS DO IT:”

MEXICAN WOMEN JOURNEYING FROM THE GED TO COMMUNITY

COLLEGE GRADUATE IN A SOUTHWESTERN STATE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The Hispanic population is the fastest growing population in the United States. Mexicans, who represent the largest Hispanic ethnicity, are also the most undereducated. Mexican women struggle between their roles as housewives and their desire to complete a higher education degree in order to improve their lives. The purpose of this study was to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing associate's degrees at a community college in southeast Texas.

A basic interpretive approach was employed to frame this study and to collect and analyze data. The sample consisted of twelve female Mexican GED graduates in their second year of postsecondary education. Additionally, two secondary sources were used to collect data for the study: interviews with two academic counselors from the institution, and institutional data showing student demographics. A thematic approach was utilized to analyze data from the audio-recorded and transcribed interviews.

The findings revealed that the institution played a significant role in facilitating the female Mexican GED graduates' completion of their degrees. Supportive teachers, services such as counseling, and financial aid all had a strong impact on the participants' persistence. The findings also showed that pregnancies at an early age caused major setbacks in connection with their educational pursuits. Yet the participants also pointed out the support they received from parents and other family members. While many of the participants' parents did not themselves have high school diplomas, they had made

education a priority for their daughters. A fourth finding suggests that the individual resilience of the participants played a significant role in their educational perseverance. The women in this study showed remarkable resilience in response to the many barriers they faced, overcoming these in order to remain in school through degree completion.

The overall findings show that Mexican women who immigrate to the United States face significant obstacles with respect to earning their two-year college degrees. However, some of these women managed to complete their education by relying on supportive teachers, services, and family members. Most importantly, those who reached their educational goals showed great personal resilience and motivation to persist in order to provide a better life for themselves and their children.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Cecilia, who has been my life coach for more than forty years. Her incessant efforts to steer me in the right direction and her acceptance of my life choices are perfect examples of the ultimate unconditional love a mother can hold for her only child.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree -at a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas. This study examined female Mexican GED graduates who, despite all the odds against them, succeeded in pursuing and completing two-year degrees at a community college. The study participants fit into the context of the changing demographic portrait of the United States.

The demographic portrait of the United States is changing; the shift is due largely to significant increases among minority groups in the population. The Hispanic population is the largest ethnic group in America, and the U.S. Census (2010a) highlights the increase in the nation's racial and ethnic diversity. The Census report states that more than half of the growth in the U.S. population over the last ten-year period (2000–2010) was due to the increase in the Hispanic population. Mexican women are part of the largest group of Hispanic immigrants in the United States accounting for 46% of the foreign-born among areas within Latin America (U.S. Census, 2010c). The terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used interchangeably in the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity to refer to the ethnic background of respondents of Latin American origin (Office of Management and Budget, 2010).

The majority of Hispanics come from Latin America (Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean). Upon arrival in the United States, many face challenges, including lack of education, language barriers, acculturation issues, lack of health insurance, and low-income wages (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). As a result, Hispanics report higher rates of unemployment than other immigrant groups. Additionally, there is much diversity among the subgroups of the Hispanic population. They differ in many ways, including their cultural background, socioeconomic status, level of education, political beliefs, language, and country of birth. Nevertheless, Hispanics are often labeled as a homogeneous group.

Historically, as well as today, Hispanic immigrants tend to originate from Latin America, and Mexico in particular represents the single largest source of Hispanic immigration to the United States. The U.S. Census (2010a) reported that people of Mexican origin constituted the largest Hispanic group, representing 63% of the total Hispanic population in the United States. This reflects a 5% increase over ten years, up from 58% in 2000. Since the quality of the current and future labor markets will depend to a great extent on this group's education and job skills, policy makers are especially concerned about persistently high dropout rates for Hispanics.

Their lack of education, credentials, and further educational opportunities presents economic and social challenges for this particular segment of the U.S. population. Lieshoff (2007) explains that a lack of language and literacy skills often contribute to the face of poverty among Hispanics who earn low-paying wages, work long hours, lack health insurance and transportation, and live in inadequate housing.

Further, Portes and Rumbaut (2006) suggest that the lives of Mexican Americans are additionally complicated by the fact that among the various Hispanic groups, Mexicans come in at the lowest end of the scale with respect to employment, health insurance, and educational attainment.

While it is relevant to discuss such numbers to raise awareness of the issues facing Mexicans, it is also important to develop strategies to improve their lives. According to Reyes-Cruz (2008), close to one quarter of U.S. Hispanics live below the poverty level. As economic and social pressures mount on this minority group, the economic and educational challenges make it difficult for parents to provide for their children's education and social development. Indeed, being undereducated and poor reduce parents' ability to support the educational needs of their children. Rumberger and Lim (2008) posit that when Mexican parents do not hold high school diplomas or General Educational Development (GED) credentials, their children are more likely to follow the same path, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty, inadequate employment, and lack of education.

Research has linked GED completion to college attendance, with a preference for attending two-year colleges over four-year colleges (Maralani, 2006). Additionally, the GED credential serves as a means of gatekeeping for college. As Tyler, Murlane, and Willett (1998) highlight, the GED program continues to grow because it is supported by the federal government and GED certification is widely accepted as a valid alternative to a high school diploma.

Cost is a significant factor that prevents GED graduates from attending college full-time. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) reported that the monetary cost of college grew by over 80% from 1985 to 2005. According to the report adult students' priorities are directly related to supporting their families, which limits the financial resources available for classes, books, and transportation. This provides a major impediment for economically disadvantaged Hispanics who are consequently unable to reap economic rewards in the workforce because of low educational attainment beyond the GED, especially at the postsecondary level. Ganderton and Santos (1995) state the issue succinctly:

Higher earnings favor college graduates, and postsecondary training is increasingly important in our economy. For Hispanics, failure to obtain postsecondary education represents a major obstacle to their economic improvement, and their increasing participation in the workforce suggests a decline in the level of education among workers in the United States. (p. 44)

As Hispanics constitute a significant component of the U.S. labor force, it is important to consider the variables that affect their educational attainment. This is essential if Hispanics are to have a greater fiscal impact on the economy, and it is also essential for the development of the social and intellectual capital of this group of people.

Background of the Study

In the previous section, the shifting landscape of the United States demographics was discussed. In addition, a general portrait of Hispanic immigrants was presented.

Pertinent specifically to this research study is the critical need to examine the acculturation of Mexican women in the United States. Therefore, the next section describes the acculturation process a large number of Mexican women experience once they arrive in the United States.

Acculturation of Mexican Women in the United States

In most cases, Hispanic women migrate to the United States with their families in search of a better life (Grzywacz, Rao, Gentry, Marin, & Arcury, 2009). According to Marcano (2001), Hispanic women in general are conflicted by their desire to acculturate themselves in the American culture while remaining true to their families' expectations of them as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Negotiating their lives, given the expectation that they will care for their families and their homes while aspiring to return to school, can be overwhelming.

Geleta (2004) describes the process of acculturation as “a function of the extent to which one is immersed in the mainstream culture while at the same time functioning effectively in the culture to which she or he has cultural origins” (p. 27). This is particularly true of Mexican women, who are part of the largest group of Hispanic immigrants in the United States (U.S. Census, 2010c). Geleta pinpoints the conflict of roles that Mexican women experience as they weigh the benefits of attending school against dedicating their full-time attention to their husbands and children. These women not only face race, class, and language barriers; they also struggle with cultural issues.

Acculturation is a complex concept that has been related to positive outcomes with respect to school dropout rates (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004) and higher income (Mason, 2004). However, acculturation has also been found to be related to negative outcomes such as mental health problems, poor diet, and substance abuse (Ayala, Baquero, & Klinger, 2008; Chamorro & Flores-Ortiz, 1998; Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996; Zemore, 2007).

Literature pertaining to Mexican women's acculturation in the United States often refers to conflict and strain in their marriages. Negy and Snyder (1997) note that women may assimilate more quickly than men to a new culture, causing them to renegotiate their traditional roles as wives. In addition, women who acculturate more easily tend to become more aggressive, as their expectations of equality in their relationship with their husbands increases (Flores et al., 2004). Therefore, according to Flores et al. (2004), given the acculturation differences between men and women, conflict within their marriages is more likely to occur as women become aware of the new opportunities that are more readily available within the new culture.

Another substantial acculturation issue affecting Mexican women in the United States, according to Delgado, Johnson, Roy, and Trevino (1990), is that they manifest eating disorders due to low self-esteem. A Hispanic health and nutrition survey found that Mexican women who live in the United States are heavier than their white and nonwhite counterparts (Delgado, Johnson, Roy, & Trevino, 1990). In trying to fit into their new culture, Mexican women are concerned with the definition of physical beauty in the United States, which stresses lean, svelte bodies. Research studies conducted

among different ethnic groups have revealed high levels of eating disorders among Mexican junior-high and high school students (Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996; Pumariega, 1986), and Hispanics in general were found to present more severe binge-eating symptoms than African Americans or white women.

As noted earlier, Mexican women in the United States are more resilient than men when adapting to the new culture. It is through their changes while acculturating that an unbalanced marital structure develops, as they strive to become more independent by seeking employment and furthering their education.

Hispanic Educational Disparity and Reduction in Economic Opportunities

Given the large representation of Hispanics in the overall U.S. population, it is important to consider carefully their education and employment status. In fact, educational disparity between Hispanics and members of other races/ethnicities, as well as disparity between male and female Hispanics, deserves close attention, as it contributes to a social divide and a reduction in economic opportunities for Hispanics in general and Hispanic females in particular. According to Porters and Rumbaut (2006), Mexico is the major source of low-skilled labor migrants in the U.S. labor market, followed by El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, while India is the primary source of professional/technical immigration, followed by China. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) also noted:

Even though this pattern is the predominant one, ethnographic evidence also shows that professionals who are part of predominantly low-skilled migrant

flows may fail to secure legal permits to practice in the United States and may become unlicensed service providers for their respective communities. (p. 81)

It has been argued that low-skilled labor jobs do not offer much opportunity for upward mobility, which in many cases prevents Mexicans from changing their socioeconomic status. Not surprisingly, Mexicans account for some of the poorest immigrant groups in the United States. Additionally, Hispanic immigrants, including Mexican Americans, are among the largest groups of foreign-born individuals who do not have health insurance. Approximately 45.6% of immigrant Mexican families are uninsured, as are 51.8% of Guatemalan immigrant families and 57.0% of Honduran immigrant families (Camarota, 2007). Hence, the cycle of poverty is exacerbated by the fact that these immigrant families have low educational attainment, low job skills, and no health insurance benefits.

According to Portes and Rumbaut (2006), there are great disparities in educational attainment within the different immigrant groups. This heterogeneity clearly separates Hispanics from other foreign-born groups. As the authors noted:

The largest foreign-born group—Mexicans—has the lowest level of schooling. This result is due not to Mexico having a singularly bad educational system but to its having a border with the United States of nearly two thousand miles, allowing peasants and workers of modest origins to come in search of work. (p. 70)

Moreover, Camarota (2007) reported that Hispanics accounted for 50.8% of immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 without a high school diploma, and only 9.8% had a college degree or higher.

The educational disparity between Hispanics and other racial/ethnic groups in the United States is an issue of great concern for the country. This concern is even more pertinent for states with relatively large Hispanic populations. The U.S. Census (2010a) found most of the Hispanic population in California (28%), Texas (19%), and Florida (8%). This imposes a greater responsibility on these states to educate Hispanics.

According to the GED Testing Service (2009), the passing rate for the GED test in Texas was 67%, compared to the overall U.S. passing rate of 69.4%, and the state had one of the highest percentages of Hispanics passing the test. According to this source, the next highest percentages of Hispanics who passed the test were in New Mexico (52.7%), California (47.1 %).. The source also noted that Hispanic females lagged behind their male counterparts in enrollment and attainment of the GED credential.

Since GED test takers use the credential to access postsecondary education and training from which they would otherwise be excluded as high school dropouts, and because further education impacts the U.S. labor market, individuals attaining the GED ultimately affect the U.S. labor market and its outcomes. The General Educational Development (GED) program was established in 1942 to assist World War II veterans without high school diplomas; the GED credential allowed them to enter postsecondary education to benefit from the GI Bill. The GED program is regarded as the best “second chance” pathway to secondary and postsecondary education (Fry, 2010). The GED test

has gone through several versions, and the current version dates to 2002. The test is recognized in the United States and several other countries as providing an alternative high school credential (GED Testing Service, 2009). Currently, to earn a GED, candidates must pass a battery of five separate tests covering language arts writing, language arts reading, science, social studies, and mathematics. Candidates who successfully complete the GED test are granted certification equivalent to a high school diploma.

As of 2012, 70 years since the inception of the GED program, approximately 20 million people had been awarded a GED credential (GED Testing Service, 2013). Additionally, more than 702,000 individuals took at least one out of the five GED content area tests and 607,000 completed the GED test battery. According to the General Educational Development Testing Service (2013), 44.3% of the test takers in 2012 were white, 24.3% were African American, and a mere 14.7% were Hispanic. These data are noteworthy and stand in sharp contrast to the statistics from the same source that show that Hispanics make up 35% of those who do not have a high school credential, compared to 10% who are white and 18% who are African American. This source also shows that in 2012, among all adults who lacked a high school credential, only roughly two out of every 100 attempted to take the GED test, and one out of every 100 passed.

Educational disparity is also noticeable when it comes to the literacy rates of Hispanics. In 2003, a National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) reported that Hispanic adults from Mexico had a lower average prose and document literacy than Hispanic adults from Puerto Rico and other countries. Mexicans also had a lower

quantitative literacy average than Hispanics from Puerto Rico (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The assessment was administered to 18,000 adults in their households and 1,200 adults in prisons to assess three literacy scales: prose, document, and quantitative literacies. Prose literacy, as identified by NAAL, included reading editorials, news stories, brochures, and instructional materials. The document literacy assessment included job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and drug and food labels. The quantitative literacy assessment included balancing a checkbook, calculating a tip, completing an order form, and determining the amount of interest on a loan based on an advertisement.

The results of the 2003 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that Hispanics' average scores had decreased 18 points in prose literacy and 14 points in document literacy compared to their scores in the 1992 NCES study. These numbers are even more staggering given that the Hispanics in the 2003 study, who constituted 12% of the entire sample, accounted for 39% of the adults in the study with below basic prose literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

Mexicans, who represented the largest Hispanic ethnicity in the United States at the time of both studies, showed lower average scores in prose and document literacy than Puerto Ricans. In addition, the average prose and document literacy of Mexican and Central and South American immigrants declined between 1992 and 2003. In 2003, approximately 50% of the Mexicans had below basic prose literacy, while only 28% of

the Puerto Ricans had below basic literacy on the same scale (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

While it is relevant to discuss the odds against Hispanics to raise awareness of the issues facing Mexican women, it is also important to discuss the factors that can improve their lives as the purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree in a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas.

Hispanics and the Community College System in the United States

Given the many challenges the majority of the Hispanic population face in the United States, community colleges are one of the few alternatives that provide educational opportunities beyond the high-school level. The flexibility to take part-time classes at community colleges, their low cost compared to four-year institutions, and their less restrictive enrollment requirements are the main factors that make community colleges attractive to low-income Hispanic students who hope to gain skills for a better job or to advance in their current job.

While community college datasets vary significantly with respect to Hispanic students' access and success, students from this population are more likely than students from other racial and ethnic groups to begin their postsecondary education at a community college (Adelman, 2005). Consequently, educators and government

authorities alike must pay close attention to this segment of the population, given the ever-growing numbers of Hispanics in the United States.

Whether community colleges are beneficial for Hispanic students is a controversial and unresolved question. There are those who say that because community colleges are easily accessible, cost less than four-year institutions, and involve minimal entrance requirements, they facilitate minority students' access (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). On the other hand, a comparison of students who attend community colleges with those who attend universities shows that the former have a lower socioeconomic status and that most are able to attend college only on a part-time basis. Cohen and Brawer (2008) observe:

If sizable percentages of minority students would not attend any college if no community college were available, and if the act of attending college to take even a few classes is beneficial, then community colleges have certainly helped in the education of minority students. (p. 56)

Since the 1970s, women have earned more associate degrees than men. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010c), 489,000 female students received an associate's degree in 2009, compared to 298,000 male students.

In summary, record levels of foreign-born individuals, especially Hispanics, continue to migrate to the United States. While their characteristics vary according to gender, class, and educational attainment, these immigrants require access to services and programs to enhance their chances of providing better lives for their families and making substantial contributions to the U.S. economy. To further this goal, this study

will examine female Mexican GED graduates who, despite all the odds against them, succeed in pursuing and completing two-year degrees in a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas.

Statement of the Problem

The Hispanic population is the largest ethnic group in the United States, accounting for 45.5 million people across the country with Mexicans nearing 55% of the Latin American foreign-born population (U.S. Census, 2010a). There is much diversity among subgroups of the Hispanic population. They differ in their cultural background, socioeconomic status, political beliefs, language, and country of birth (Ramirez & De La Cruz, 2003).

Problem Statement 1

While there is literature on the low Hispanic levels of educational attainment in the United States, little empirical research has focused on Mexican women who are GED recipients and persist long enough to complete two-year postsecondary degrees. Mexican immigrant women exhibit many signs of distress from the acculturation process, including mental and physical health problems, poor diets, and substance abuse (Ayala, Baquero, & Klinger, 2008; Chamorro & Flore-Ortiz, 1998). Yet despite the many challenges they face, some manage to persist and further their education.

Problem Statement 2

A study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics published in 2007 showed that only 5.6% of Hispanics completed an associate's degree in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). While the number of Mexican women who are GED recipients and have completed an associate's degree could not be found in the current literature, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that their risk factors for not completing a postsecondary degree are very high, given their ethnicity, gender, age, and lack of education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree at a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What role do community colleges play in facilitating degree completion among female Mexican GED graduates in the United States?
2. How does their gender influence Mexican women's participation in postsecondary education?

3. What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their pursuit of postsecondary education?
4. How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

Conceptual Framework

To provide an exploratory analysis of the experiences of Mexican women who are GED graduates along their trajectory from GED to postsecondary completion the conceptual frameworks guiding this study are: persistence theory and resilience theory.

Persistence Theory

Vincent Tinto (1993) argued that the reasons for students' departures from higher education are "reflections of the dynamic nature of the social and intellectual life of the communities which are housed in the institution, in particular of the daily interaction which occurs among its members" (p. 5), and that students who are engaged in activities outside of the classroom but within the college community are more likely to persist because of this involvement beyond the classroom walls.

Tinto noted that adult students, unlike typical students who enter college right after high school, are "more likely to encounter greater problems in finding on-campus time to study enough to meet the minimum academic standards of the institution" (1993, p. 76). The difficulties they face, which are related to marriages, children at home, off-campus living, and employment, contribute to their failure to complete their degree

programs. Often, adult students' goals for attending college are economic. They usually pursue higher education in order to obtain employment or to advance in their career, in order to provide a better life for their families. Even though external obligations such as family and employment prevent adult students from dedicating themselves to their schoolwork full-time, their persistence can be linked to the availability of supportive faculty and their participation in different campus activities and student groups (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Naretto, 1995).

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory is a complex and multifaceted field of study. Researchers from an array of fields, including sociologists, psychologists, social workers, and educators (among others), have developed and applied resilience theory within their specific areas of study. Resilience theory, as VanBreda (2001) observed, “addresses the strength that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity” (p. 1).

Resilience theory appears in many different forms across the different fields of study, including individual resilience, family resilience, community resilience, resilience-based policy, resilience in social work, cross-cultural perspectives on resilience, and deployment resilience. Individual resilience is the focus in the present study—specifically, how individuals handle adversity in order to succeed. This study seeks to address the issues that could have prevented Mexican women who are GED graduates from completing their postsecondary education. It seeks to understand how

they persevered through the process and were thus able to complete their associate's degrees.

Resilience can be found in all individuals at different stages in their lives. Most human beings, consciously or not, have had at various times to find a resilience within themselves to survive life circumstances to varying degrees. This study seeks to understand how resilience was demonstrated by Mexican women who have been able to obtain a GED credential and complete a postsecondary degree.

Significance of the Study

While studies conducted to date have focused on college access and persistence for low-income adult students (Bailey & Alonso, 2005; Campa 2010; Corrigan, 2003; Graff, McCain, & Gomez-Vilchis, 2013; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Oakes, Rogers & Lipton, 2002), not enough attention has been paid to examining the participation and persistence of Mexican women who are GED graduates in postsecondary programs. Further research on how external social systems such as families and friends contribute to or hinder degree completion will provide researchers and practitioners with significant information for improving educational theories and practices.

This study is significant for theory, practice, and policy in the adult education field, specifically as these relate to Mexican women with GEDs in postsecondary education. It has the potential to inform local policy makers, school administrators, and local, state, and federal agencies by providing new insights for educators, postsecondary education policy makers, and governments.

On a theoretical level, this study affords researchers an opportunity to study the motivational factors that influence the persistence of GED graduates in postsecondary education. The findings may highlight areas pertaining to persistence in postsecondary education that need further studies. On a practical level, this study provides strategies for program improvement to increase the retention rates of GED graduates enrolled in postsecondary education. It allows educators to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of Mexican women's lives as they pursue higher education. Additionally, the identified motivational factors (internal and external) can be deliberately integrated into institutional program development and practice. These factors may prove to have significant policy implications.

The government provides considerable sources of funding for educational opportunities at the adult basic level as well as the postsecondary level, i.e., The Workforce Investment Act and Achieving the Dream. The results of this study may inform policy makers about how community colleges can facilitate degree completion for female Mexican GED graduates. Also, the findings can raise the awareness of federal authorities (stakeholders) about the need to appropriately fund programs targeting this particular group of students in order to increase their retention as well as their completion rates.

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms presented here are for the purpose of this study:

General Educational Development (GED): Earning GED certification requires candidates to pass five separate tests covering language arts writing, language arts reading, science, social studies, and mathematics. Once test takers have successfully passed all five tests, the GED credential certifies that they have high-school-level academic skills.

Persistence: The term *persistence* is defined in this study as the ability to remain in school through completion while facing multiple challenges.

Hispanic and Latino: These terms refer to Spanish-speaking people who come from Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, or South or Central America, regardless of race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a).

Nontraditional student: These are students who are older than the traditional college student, usually 25 and older. According to Choy (2002), nontraditional students typically have at least one of the following characteristics: they (a) attend school part-time, (b) are single parents, (c) do not enter college the same year as they complete high school, (d) work full-time, (e) are financially independent, or (f) have children or dependents other than a spouse.

Delimitation of the Study

This research does not seek to provide an exhaustive exploration of the experience of Mexican female GED graduates as they transition to postsecondary educational contexts and complete their two-year college degrees. Furthermore, given the boundaries of the study, it does not seek to generalize its results to any population,

nor to the location where the study will be conducted. Rather, using the persistence theory and resilience theory bodies of literature as its guide, this study seeks to uncover the characteristics of the participants' lives that were responsible for their persistence in and completion of their two-year education programs.

Limitations of the Study

Based on the methodology that provides the guidelines for this qualitative study, the data analysis will be an inductive and researcher-based process. The participants in the study are native Spanish speakers and that as such, they may feel more comfortable communicating in Spanish than in English. Adequate translation needs to take place to ensure that the content of participants' responses is not lost in translation.

Summary and Organization of the Dissertation

This introductory chapter has provided the background for this study. It has explored the nature of Hispanic immigration to the United States, issues of acculturation faced by Mexican women, and educational disparity and reduction in economic opportunities for Hispanics. In addition, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, definitions of terms, and the delimitation and limitations of the study were presented. Chapter 2 reviews literature pertinent to Latinas' college experiences in the United States and Mexican college women, adult and higher education engagement and the persistence of Hispanics in academe, the economic benefits of the GED, the community college system and nontraditional college students,

and transition programs. Chapter 3 describes the study's research design, including the methods that were utilized in data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 describes the findings that emerged from the data analysis. Chapter 5, the final chapter, discusses the research findings, their implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree at a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas.

In this chapter, I present the relevant literature concerning Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing their associate's degrees in a community college. This chapter is organized as follows. First, the context of Mexican women, Latinas' academic challenges and Mexican college women in the United States are introduced. Second, literature related to the community college system in the U.S. and nontraditional college students is discussed. Third, adult, higher education and the persistence of Hispanics in college are presented. Fourth, the economic benefits of the GED are introduced. Fifth, transition programs from adult education to college-level programs are discussed.

The Context of Mexican Women

In the traditional Mexican household, women are valued within patriarchal families, often due to Mexicans' strong Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary as Madre de Dios (De La Torre, 2009), and they are primarily responsible for the home and children. This role may directly conflict with their pursuit of educational opportunities.

While Hispanic women migrate to the United States with their families in search of a better life, there is, in most cases, a cultural understanding that their role is to take care of the home and family. In contrast, their husbands' role is to work and support the family. Thus, De La Torre (2009), purports these women are not only faced with economic and social challenges; they must also struggle with cultural issues that influence their educational attainment.

There is also negotiation in the home regarding Mexican women's employment in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Parrado & Zenteno, 2001). In Mexico, there is a strong belief that women are mainly responsible for their children's care and household maintenance, which prevents most women from engaging in the labor force. Consequently, Parrado & Zenteno, (2001) observe that women are usually employed to provide services such as laundering or ironing, which are considered secondary labor market jobs.

In substantiating their educational experiences in the United States, Mexican women are very much affected by their race, class, gender, and language diversity. Cardenas and Cardenas (1977), in proposing the "theory of incompatibilities", argue that students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, particularly immigrant students, do not do well in school because the school culture differs radically from their own language, home culture, economic needs, learning styles, and life experiences.

Latinas' Academic Challenges

Research studies conducted over the last decade have focused on Latinas participation in education and how they are able to be positive forces to improving their own lives (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010; Durand, 2011; Espinoza, 2010). Many still feel the pressure of fulfilling their roles and responsibilities within their home environment which might constrain their decisions to pursue higher education. According to Sy & Romero (2008), it is the requirement of having to fulfill such family obligations that could present challenges for Latinas to transition to higher education.

Latinas often feel disconnected to the campus culture, which is incongruent with their own culture. This is exacerbated by the fact that higher educational institutions can underestimate this minority group, not trusting that their culture is a good fit for college. It is only natural that Latinas feel as if they are strangers in a foreign land when attending college (Oceguera, Locks & Vega, 2009).

When it comes to higher education success among Latinas, research has shown that there are a number of contributing factors, which include family and community support, a strong sense of self-efficacy, and easy access to resources (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Cerezo & Chang, 2013). In spite of the many challenges Latinas faced, such as negative experiences on campus, discrimination, and unsupportive teachers, they succeeded in completing their degrees (Cavazos et al., 2010, Gandara & Contreras, 2009). They showed resilience in overcoming their obstacles and were able to persist in college to complete their degrees.

A study conducted by Phinney and Hass(2003), identified a number of coping responses minority college students, including Latinas, used to manage stressful situations during an academic semester such as, being proactive, seeking support, distancing, accepting, and being positive. The results of the study indicate that those who were more able to cope with the challenges in the academic environment expressed a greater sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. These students did not feel that they lacked social support.

Another study by Cavazos, Johnson & Sparrow (2010), focused on coping responses Latinos utilize to manage academic stress indicated that this minority group of students resort to an array of strategies to overcome challenges in college. In their study, Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow(2010), interviewed three Latinos and eight Latinas enrolled in college. The following coping responses were mentioned by study participants: positive reframing, acceptance, self-talk, maintaining focus on final goals, using low expectations as motivation, self-reflection, taking action, and seeking support. Multiple coping responses were discussed by each participant providing evidence that these strategies are often used in combination to deal with the academic challenges they face. The results of the study indicate that many barriers to higher education are perceived by Latino college students. Lack of college information, low expectations, and gender and race-based stereotypes were the three main barriers discussed by participants.

Mexican College Women in the United States

Even though Mexicans comprise the largest Hispanic subgroup in the United States, accounting for over 55% of the Latin American foreign-born population, their college completion rates are the lowest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). Therefore, the need to study Mexican students' challenges faced and overcome while pursuing higher education is invaluable as they are active participants of our society; yet their college completion rates are the lowest when compared to other minority groups (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

While most empirical research studies on Hispanic persistence and resilience in the 1990's aggregated males and females; a few were conducted on perceived distress in Mexican women attending college. Findings demonstrated that social support, female caregiver support, and family support were the main factors influencing these women to persist in their studies (Castillo & Hill, 2004, Gandara, 1995, Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996, Solberg & Villarreal, 1997). Emotional support received from family was found to be more important than other predictors identified by the studies such as income, gender and acculturation. When social support systems are in place, regardless of economic level, stressful situations and negative feelings are greatly reduced (Finch & Vega, 2003; Hovey & Magana, 2002).

In substantiating Mexican women's resilience to the effects of stress, a study by Guinn, Vincent and Dugas(2009), found that educational attainment was one of the main factors contributing to Mexican women's stress resilience. Another important predictor in reducing stress was the degree of acculturation among participants. Findings

demonstrate that higher education attainment has an impact in reducing Mexican women's stress because of the belief that with more education, participants' chances for upward mobility is much higher.

Community College System

The U.S. community college system was established at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the early years, the main factor behind the formation of community colleges was the need for trained workers to work within the expanding industry sector. Another important factor was a desire to foster social equality by giving more individuals access to higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Community colleges in the United States have, under several names, repeatedly been defined and redefined since the 1920s. Cohen and Brawer (2008) define the community college as "any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (p. 5). This definition is noteworthy, as it reflects the most current needs of students by including both comprehensive two-year colleges and technical institutes, each of which may be public or private. The definition excludes vocational schools, adult basic education organizations, and proprietary business and trade colleges.

In the last few decades, community colleges have made significant efforts to recruit different segments of the population. This has increased the enrollment of ethnic minorities. The American Association of Community Colleges' numbers show that Hispanic students accounted for 15% of community college students in 2011, with

African Americans at 13%, Asian Americans at 6%, and Native Americans at 1% (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011). In Texas, the number of Hispanic students reached 30%, the majority of community colleges in the state were designated as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), which are institutions in which at least 25% of the full-time students are Hispanic.

Nontraditional College Students

Increasingly, postsecondary institutions have opened their doors to individuals with many different characteristics, “including first-generation students, low-income students, and students with remedial education needs” (Kennen & Lopez, 2005, p. 33). These nontraditional students are considered to be at risk of not completing a college degree. Kennen and Lopez (2005) reported that approximately one half of Latino graduates took an average of roughly 59 months from the time they first enrolled in a four-year institution to graduate, and 70 months since high school graduation.

For the purposes of this research study, it was relevant to review the literature on nontraditional college students, as the study participants fall within this group. Research has shown that the demographics of college students have changed considerably in recent years (Chao & Good, 2004; Taylor & House, 2010). Moreover, not only colleges and universities have begun to tailor services and programs to meet the needs of nontraditional college students; other entities such as community-based organizations, adult basic programs, faith-based organizations, and an array of foundations have developed initiatives to bridge GED students to college.

Traditional students, as defined by Kennen and Lopez (2005), are students “who graduate from high school in the spring, enroll in college in the fall, and walk out four years later with bachelor’s degrees in hand” (p. 32). Brazziel (1989) reported that “adults are the fastest-growing segment of all population groups in higher education” (p. 16), and traditional students are now considered the minority. In defining the characteristics of contemporary college students, Cook and King (2005) highlighted that

the demographic characteristics of American college students have shifted dramatically over the last 15 years. Only one in six undergraduates is a “typical” 18-year-old who enrolls at a residential campus, stays for four years, and graduates with a baccalaureate degree. Adult students (those who are 25 years of age and older) are becoming the new majority on campuses across the nation, and many of these students, particularly low-income adults, face multiple challenges and barriers to academic success. (p. 1)

According to the GED Testing Service (2012), approximately 62% of the adults who obtained a GED credential in 2012 expressed interest in continuing their education. In most cases, these adults spent 10 or more years outside of a school environment before they decided to pursue further education. Consequently, these nontraditional students face challenges in navigating the college system as well as in juggling their different life roles as workers, parents, and spouses. Those who pass the GED test may then delay enrollment in postsecondary education (Behal, 1983; Golden, 2003; Ou, 2008; Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010), and those who do enroll tend to enroll in a two-year program (Ou 2008; Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy,

2010). Given this context, financial and family concerns are two of the most significant considerations that impact the adult learning experience. However, it is important to note that nontraditional students are not a monolithic group, and this sets the context for how accessible higher education is for these students, how they persist, and at what rate they matriculate.

Also referred to as adult learners, nontraditional students face considerably different challenges from those faced by traditional students. Some additional factors that distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students include lack of a definable or characterizing age demographic, stronger consumer orientation, and limited support for and social acceptability of their student status (Richter-Antion, 1986). For these reasons, all aspects of college and the college environment must be made responsive to the needs of this population.

Kaufman, Agars, and Lopez-Wagner's (2008) study at a Hispanic serving institution examined personality and motivation to predict nontraditional undergraduates' first-quarter GPAs. The findings among the 315 nontraditional undergraduates who participated in the study indicate that to be successful, these students must have high levels of intrinsic motivation and conscientiousness during their first semester. It is critical to provide support for such students in order to prevent high drop-out rates during their first semester in college.

Because nontraditional students often balance school work with life demands, their needs should be addressed differently. Chao and Good (2004) argue that counselors must understand nontraditional students' situations to better serve them: "Accurate

knowledge of non-traditional students' issues can enable counselors to effectively advocate for them, making professional services more relevant to their specific needs in personal, vocational, and educational areas" (pp. 5–6). It is clear that while nontraditional students face unique challenges, the population is not homogeneous, and although there has been some research on female nontraditional students (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Terrell, 1990), there is a gap in the literature regarding male nontraditional students as well as regarding the needs of female and male Hispanic nontraditional undergraduate students. Recognizing their needs and tailoring services to address these needs is the first step in preventing unsuccessful college experiences for these students.

Hispanic Students in Adult and Higher Education

Like the federal government, state governments make a sizeable investment in postsecondary education. With a growing demand for accountability in all areas of public spending, the ability to articulate the benefits that result from the investment in higher education is important. Studies as early as Attinasi (1989) reported that in view of its importance for economic and social improvement, discourse about higher education and its relevance to disadvantaged subpopulations was increasing. Higher education provides a broad range of benefits to both individuals and society.

Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) suggested that institutional variables (contextual factors) are important influences on college persistence among Hispanics. Building on the work of Tinto (1975), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) highlighted key institutional variables that influence college persistence: faculty involvement and concern for

students, peer interaction, and institutional concerns for student development. To address the challenges, a large number of education programs have been developed to assist these adult learners in obtaining their GED credential and in transitioning into postsecondary education.

Discussing persistence in ABE programs, Comings (2007) explained that persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her educational goals, and persistence could start through self-study before the first episode of participation in a program. Persistence ends when the student decides to stop learning. (p. 24)

Persistence research indicates that persistence strategies must take place in ABE programs to enhance adult learners' chances of successfully achieving their educational goals. A study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs, funded by The Wallace Foundation and conducted by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation in collaboration with the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, discussed two approaches to improving student persistence: providing support services in the library literacy programs to directly address learners' personal barriers to participation, and improving operations and instructional services at the libraries participating in the study (Porter, Chase, Comings, & Cuban, 2005). Adult learners are more likely to persist if they feel teachers and staff care about them as individuals, as this helps them become more aware of how learning can impact their lives. Most adult students have not reached their goals by the time they quit attending classes. According to the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs, only 5% of adult students

achieve their goals before leaving these programs (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1994).

Additionally, persistence studies conducted on ABE programs show that an average 100 hours of instruction are needed before most adult education students show progress (Comins, Sum, & Uvin, 2000; Darkenwald, 1986; Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005; Rose & Wright, 2006; Sticht, 1982). However, as Comings (2007) highlights, a very small percentage of adult students are able to achieve their educational goals with only 100 hours of instruction:

Program participation of 100 hours or even 150 hours, therefore, is probably inadequate for most adult students to reach their learning goals. Changes in policies and practices that support increased persistence could lead to more adult education students spending sufficient hours engaged in learning and therefore reaching their learning goals. (p. 26)

Lack of persistence in most cases can be attributed to an inability to set short-term goals upon entering an adult education program. When adult learners set unachievable goals, they become frustrated, which increases their chances of dropping out.

Persistence in Academe

A number of different programs have implemented successful persistence strategies. Among them, Capital IDEA, a college preparatory academy established in the late 1990s through the efforts of Austin Interfaith and the central Texas business community, was designed to increase adult students' academic skills in mathematics,

reading, and writing in order to prepare them for college. The program also offers English as a Second Language (ESL) and GED classes for college-bound students who test above a 5th-grade level in reading and mathematics. Approximately 50% of the students enrolled in the program are Hispanics. In December 2007, with 637 students in the program, released outcomes showed an 84% year-to-year retention rate (Griffen, 2008).

A 2008 report published by Excelencia (Excellence) in Education entitled *The Condition of Latinos in Education* shows that in 2006–2007, approximately 51% of those enrolled in community colleges were Hispanics, and 59% of these students were women. Hispanic immigrants who enter college are less likely to earn a degree than members of other groups. Between 1995 and 2001, only 30% of the Hispanics who entered college had earned a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree (Santiago, 2008a).

Another significant report published in 2008 by Excelencia in Education—*Modeling Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): Campus Practices That Work For Latino Students*—focuses on institutional practices of six community colleges and six public universities that rank among the top institutions in the United States in enrollment of Hispanics and degrees awarded to Hispanic students (Santiago, 2008b). The report notes that these institutions, which are located in California, New York, and Texas, have developed an array of strategies for Latino success. Some of the strategies are (a) sharing data about Latino students with faculty, staff, and students; (b) using short-term measures of academic progress to guide improvement in curricula, instruction, and

support services for Latino students; (c) encouraging and supporting the sharing of disaggregated student data between community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions; (d) providing a holistic approach to serving Latino students within the institution; (e) partnering with other educational organizations in the community to align educational resources; (f) seeking external sources for developing and testing innovative practices while adding proven practices to the institutional budget; and (g) applying lessons learned in improving services to Latinos to improve services for all students. While there were substantial differences among the 12 institutions, the numbers show high completion rates among the Latino students. As mentioned, these HSIs ranked among the top nationally for their enrollment of Latino students and degrees awarded annually to these students.

Additionally, a cohort support program called *Latinas Juntas* (Latina Women Together) developed by California State University, Dominguez Hills, focuses on improving the engagement of Hispanic female students to encourage them to persist and complete their college education (Perdew, 2013). The program is designed to enrich the academic lives of Latina students and encourage them to pursue their goals, as well as to build their confidence so they can overcome the obstacles they face and create positive options. *Latinas Juntas* is a daylong program that brings together students, faculty, and staff to focus on (a) students taking responsibility for their education, (b) exploration of the role of culture and family in their education, (c) engaging students in personal and interpersonal development, (d) promoting self-awareness, (e) celebrating the diversity of the Latina community, and (f) establishing a supportive network among students,

faculty, and staff. Given the success of the program, a weekly support group for Latina students was created to discuss issues and challenges Latina students face in their academic careers. Such programs empower Latinas to persist in the academic programs and complete their degrees.

Many programs have been developed to address the needs of adult learners, more specifically, Hispanics. These include community college initiatives. According to Robinson, Metoyer, Byrd, Louis, & Bonner (2012), “the community college has played a pivotal role by extending access to educational opportunities for under-represented populations, and laid the foundation for many professions since the inception of Joliet College in 1901” (p. 2). Historically, community colleges have served communities that would not normally have an opportunity to pursue higher education (Plinske & Packard, 2010). A survey of first-time college students in 2003–2004 shows that 57% of the students who were first-generation students with family incomes of \$32,000 or lower started at a two-year or less-than-two-year college, rather than at a four-year institution (Berkner, Choy, & Hunt-White, 2008). However, students who enter higher education through the community college path face greater difficulty in earning a college credential. Of the first-time college students who enrolled in community colleges in 2003–2004, fewer than 36% earned a postsecondary credential within six years (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010).

It is through the initiatives that address this immigrant group’s culture and socioeconomic status that Hispanics have gained access to the different educational systems available to all in the United States. However, as Cervero & Wilson (2001a)

point out, existing societal hierarchies may predetermine the level of success for these students; the power structures of which they are a part will ultimately affect their educational participation and success. There is a need for a critical look at higher education and its pipeline for this quickly growing population, as well as a closer look at research findings that have implications for policy making that can help Hispanics improve their educational attainment, secure better paying jobs, have access to health insurance, and thereby increase their chances of living above the poverty line.

In the next section, the economic benefits of the GED are reviewed. This review provides a comparison between the economic benefits of having a high-school diploma as opposed to a GED credential.

Economic Benefits of the GED

Many high school dropouts pursue the GED credential because they believe that it will lead to greater success in the labor market (Tyler, 2004). Although the credential has gained acceptance as an alternative form of the high school credential, there is some disagreement about the economic benefits associated with passing the test (Georges, 2001). While a number of studies have focused on the economic benefits of the GED, they have yielded mixed results.

Cameron and Heckman (1993) found that male GED-holders are not considered the labor-market equivalent of regular high school graduates. Data from Georges's (2001) study show, after controlling for differences in ability, employment, and demographic characteristics, that women with a GED certificate have a significantly

higher probability of entry into poverty than high school graduates. A national study of 19,258 adults conducted by the United States Department of Education was released in 2007 with a data set entitled *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NAAL) that examined economic and noneconomic outcomes for those who earned the GED certificate. The participants fell into three groups of adults: high school graduates, high school drop-outs with no equivalent certification, and GED recipients (GED Testing Service, 2008). There were 766 participants in the GED recipient group, and the major variables collected were: (a) weekly wage, (b) personal income, (c) labor force participation, and (d) work history. The study showed that 46% of the participants who held a GED credential or a high school diploma were employed full-time, while only 35% of the adults who had not completed a high-school level of education held full-time positions.

Furthermore, the comparison of weekly wages was found to be significant statistically . Participants who held a traditional high school diploma earned on average \$50.00 more per week than GED recipients (GED Testing Service, 2008). The results of this study show that even though GED recipients are not at the top of the earning scale, they do have a better chance of upward mobility than adults who do not have a high-school level of education.

It is relevant to note that the GED Testing Service's 2012 annual report indicates that the average age of all candidates is slightly more than 26. This average age was the same for 2011 and 2010, but shows an increase of half a year compared to 2009 and more than a year compared to 2008. Additionally, while the percentage of Hispanic test-

takers remained relatively stable, among the 20.2% of the test takers in 2010 who were Hispanic, 18.2% received their credentials. These data support the premise that high-school dropouts and adults who are older than 25 realize the need to further their education to initiate their paths out of poverty. It has become increasingly difficult to find a job and earn decent wages to support a family.

In contrast, while Tyler, Murane, and Willett (2000) noted that the relationship between earnings and educational attainment was consistent across the human capital literature, their study indicated that GED certification signals increased earnings—between 10% and 19%—for young white dropouts. This quantitative study examined Social Security Administration earnings data and GED test scores. It analyzed the variation in GED status according to each state's standards for passing in order to identify the value of the GED. Interestingly, the authors found no significant effects for minority dropouts. Therefore, this study suggests that the role of GED certification in the job market is multifaceted. Clark and Jaeger (2006) noted that GED test takers “might acquire significant levels of human capital in preparing for the exam (p. 783)” However, only one quarter of the test takers spend more than 100 hours preparing for the exam (Boesel et al., 1998). For the context of this research, which examines foreign-born GED recipients, hours of preparation for the exam may enhance English language proficiency, which might in turn enhance marketability in the labor force.

Concerning the economic status of female GED completers, research indicates that women who hold a GED credential earn more than women who are high school dropouts and do not hold a GED, but less than women who are high school graduates

(Cao et al., 1996; Georges, 2001; Murnane et al., 1995). Consequently, female GED holders are significantly less likely to exit poverty than high school graduates but more likely to do so than high school dropouts.

In addition to reviewing the economic benefits of the GED, it is important to understand the role of the community college system as it relates to minority ethnic groups. Hence, the next section will focus on access to community college education by minority groups and the characteristics of nontraditional students.

GED to College Transition Programs

Across the United States, a vast number of programs have been designed to assist GED graduates in entering postsecondary education. In Texas, according to Yoost (2007), community colleges have instituted a number of initiatives that focus on increasing the number of GED graduates who transition into higher education. This source points out that as open-admission institutions, these community colleges have played a critical role in increasing access to postsecondary education for students at the margins of society. Other agencies and foundations have directed efforts towards a smooth transition or pipeline for adult learners to progress to college.

In 2006, for example, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, in partnership with the New England Literacy Resource Center, developed a project to support adult basic education (ABE) services in order to better prepare underrepresented GED recipients for transitioning to college. According to Reno James, the foundation's vice president who manages the ABE-to-College Project, adult students preparing for the GED do not

believe they are worthy or capable of attending college (Wilson, 2006). Among other barriers, these students are not familiar with the college admission process, which results in a lack of the necessary knowledge for navigating the college admissions process as well as a lack of information about the financial resources available to them.

Testimonials from students enrolled in the ABE-to-College Transition Project confirmed the importance of providing support for students in transition. When asked about the program, one student stated:

I'm a lot more intelligent than I thought I was. I have more energy than I thought I did. Growing up, my parents didn't know about college. Not that they told me not to, but they just didn't know how important it was. But I learned that not only the Huxtables can go to college; I can too. (Wilson, 2006, p. 26)

As previously noted, nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance, and such transition programs seek to provide the necessary avenues of support for their transition to college.

In *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly publication formerly published by The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Spohn and Kallenbach (2004) described support systems provided by adult basic education programs to assist GED students in their transition to college. These include free courses in college reading, writing, and pre-algebra, along with a college survival skills course that covers note taking, test taking, and time and stress management.

Moreover, new initiatives presented at the National Conference on Effective Transitions in Adult Education hosted by the National College Transition Network

indicate that specific projects addressing adult students' transition to postsecondary education are crucial to the success of these students in pursuing a college degree. For instance, a pre-transition pilot program was offered by El Paso Independent School District's Adult Education Program in collaboration with El Paso Community College in Texas to a group of 17 adult students interested in postsecondary education. The development phase brought adult education instructors and college faculty together to focus on four areas: academic readiness, career exploration, college survival skills, and personal readiness. Other presentations at the conference focused on programs aimed at strengthening postsecondary outcomes for low-income adults. Transition programs are particularly important to groups such as the Hispanic population that are not achieving high rates of college-level education.

Summary

This chapter presented a review of the literature relevant to the Hispanic population educational challenges, focusing on Latinas and their persistence in completing higher education degrees. A discussion of persistence research and factors that contribute to Hispanics' persistence in academe was presented. Interestingly, research suggests that community colleges have played a crucial role in providing educational access to underrepresented populations. However, research has also shown that these students face greater challenges in completing their postsecondary education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree in community college in the Southeastern region of Texas.

This chapter outlines the methodology for the study. The chapter first presents the research design and methodological rationale, specifically, the site and sample selection as well as a description of the specific methods used in data collection. Then the chapter describes the data management and analysis procedures.

Research Design and Methodological Rationale

The nature of a research problem determines the methodological approach. Qualitative research, defined as “a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39), has been utilized for an array of subjects in the social and human sciences. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for this research because, as Merriam (1998) highlights, “unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is concerned with ... individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). Qualitative methods allow researchers to deeply investigate issues of gender, culture, and marginalized groups (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, in qualitative research, (a) the researcher is the primary instrument for data

collection and analysis, (b) fieldwork is involved, (c) an inductive research strategy is employed, and (d) the data and analysis are richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998).

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of how Mexican women who are GED graduates navigate their way from the GED certification to postsecondary education in the United States. The qualitative framework used for this study is considered to be naturalistic because the research occurred in real world settings with interviews consisting of open-ended questions (Patton, 2002). The data collected from these Mexican women are based on the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of the participants. The main focus of the study was to hear the voices of these female Mexican GED graduates and to seek a full understanding of their educational experiences and the factors that influenced their persistence in completing an associate's degree in community college in an urban setting in Texas.

The basic interpretive research approach was utilized. The basic interpretive approach was most appropriate for accurately capturing the interpretations and meanings these women ascribed to their educational experiences and trajectories. According to Merriam (2009), this approach is useful for understanding “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). Additionally, this study's approach conformed to what Creswell (2007) described as a suitable approach to the study of the experiences of this particular marginalized group. He posited that the slow process of collecting and analyzing data allows researchers

to tell a story that unfolds over time. We present the study following the traditional approach to scientific research (i.e., problem, question, method, findings). We talk about our experiences in conducting the study, and how they shape our interpretations of the results. We let the voices of our participants speak and carry the story through dialogue, perhaps dialogue presented in Spanish and English subtitles. (p. 43)

Basic interpretive inquiries are commonly used in educational research. Merriam (2002) explains that in most basic interpretive research studies, “data are collected through interviews, observations or document analysis” (p. 38). Additionally, the data analysis includes identifying recurring themes and organizing them in different categories. By adopting the basic interpretive approach, I was able to gain a deep understanding of how the participants interpret their worlds as mothers, workers, and students, and how they perceive and make sense of their experiences as they carry out their different roles in society.

Site Selection

Selecting a suitable site in qualitative research is crucial to developing a sound study. Marshall and Rossman (1989) noted that

the ideal site is where (1) entry is possible; (2) there is a high probability that a rich mix of many of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and/or structure that may be a part of the research question will be present; (3) the researcher can devise an appropriate role to maintain continuity of presence for

as long as necessary; and (4) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured by avoiding poor sampling decisions. (p. 54)

This research study took place at a large community college in Texas. The college is a comprehensive public two-year higher education institution. It offers college-level programs, continuing education, professional development, and college preparatory and economic development programs. This site was selected because it is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in which at least 25% of the students are Hispanic. In the fall semester of 2012, 33% of the enrolled students were Hispanic, another 33% were African American, while 13% of the students were Asian, 17% were white, and 4% identified themselves as “other” (American Indian, Alaska Native, multi-racial, nonresident alien, and unknown ethnicity). With such a large Hispanic population, this institution provided me with the opportunity to examine a number of participants who fit the criteria presented in this study.

Sample Selection

The sample for this study consisted of 12 Mexican women who had immigrated to the United States, received their GED certification, and enrolled in a community college. A purposeful sampling method is used most often in qualitative research. According to Merriam (2009), purposeful sampling allows investigators “to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). Purposeful sampling increases the range of the data collected, and it allows the researcher the ability to identify themes that are directly related to the

contextual conditions and cultural norms of the participants (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

A criterion sampling approach was utilized. Criterion sampling is used when participants must meet some predetermined criterion of critical importance to the development of a qualitative research study (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of this study, participants had to meet several criteria. They had to be: (a) women born in Mexico, (b) who hold a GED credential from the United States, (c) who are 25 years of age or older and are thus considered nontraditional students, and (d) in the second year of their academic program at the time of the interview. These criteria were established to allow for the selection of participants who could provide valuable information about how their continued enrollment in the academic program fostered their desire to pursue a postsecondary education. Using these criteria, the participants for this study were selected from the Institutional Research Department's data gathered at a community college in Texas.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were allowed to express themselves freely when addressing the research questions or other issues of their choosing. Semi-structured interviews, which are often used in qualitative investigations, are described by Merriam (2009) as follows:

In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. (p. 90)

The interview guide for this study included questions that address specific information for all interviewees. However, it primarily included open-ended questions to allow respondents to answer freely, according to their unique experiences. Interviewing has been a common practice of social science researchers for decades (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Interviewers seek to gather information in a contemporary storytelling mode in which interviewees narrate life accounts in response to interview questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

I sought to understand how female Mexican GED graduates persevere long enough in their educational pursuits to complete their postsecondary education. Therefore, the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in which open-ended questions are asked of participants was the appropriate approach for this study. The focus of the interview questions allowed students to share stories that illuminate persistence strategies or obstacles. The participants in this study were interviewed individually at a place of their choosing in order to make them as comfortable as possible for answering questions as well as freely elaborating on their lives. The interview with each participant took approximately 45–60 minutes.

Interviews focused on the four research questions that guided this study, which are:

1. What role do community colleges play in facilitating degree completion among female Mexican GED graduates in the United States?
2. How does their gender influence Mexican women's participation in postsecondary education?
3. What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their pursuit of postsecondary education?
4. How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

Interview questions addressed issues related to the participants' demographics, their participation in a GED preparatory program, and internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors contributing to their decisions to enroll and to persist in pursuing their postsecondary education. Moreover, the interview protocol included questions about strategies the participants employed to persevere in their educational pursuits.

In addition, two academic counselors from the institution where the participants were enrolled were interviewed. These interviews gathered important information about how the institution's counselors monitor students' academic growth along with the specific issues that Mexican women encounter as they navigate their way through college life. The academic counselors were also asked to elaborate on the different referral services participants can access to address personal circumstances that may affect their ability to attend and complete their degree. The data collected from these interviews provided a deeper understanding of the different issues the participants

experienced throughout their academic lives as well as the tools the institution used to foster degree completion.

Additionally, institutional data were collected during the research process. The institutional data included information on the participants' ethnicities and ages, as well as the college's retention and drop-out rates. Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed several reasons why documents should be utilized as sources of information in a qualitative inquiry:

(1) they are almost always available, on a low-cost (mostly investigator time) or free basis, (2) they are a stable source of information, both in the sense that they may accurately reflect situations that occurred at some time in the past and that they can be analyzed and reanalyzed without undergoing changes in the interim, (3) they are a rich source of information, contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent, (4) they are often legally unassailable, representing, especially in the case of records, formal statements that satisfy some accountability requirement, and (5) they are, unlike human respondents, nonreactive. (pp. 276–277)

These data will allow me to better understand the demographics of first- and second-year students' retention and attrition rates.

Data Management and Analysis

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I carefully reviewed each interview transcript to verify accuracy and to identify categories. Importantly, the

data analysis began during the interviewing because, as Merriam (1998) and Creswell (2007) have pointed out, data collection, analysis, and reporting should be done concurrently. The data analysis focused on participants' views and their experiences, based on the four research questions proposed in this study.

Additionally, a profile of each participant was prepared to provide information regarding their demographics, educational background, and marital statuses. The profiles (or case stories) use pseudonyms and present a short narrative that will acquaint readers with the participants in a more meaningful way.

A thematic analysis research strategy enabled me to focus on content rather than on language and grammar structure. I used this approach to explore the most prominent themes discussed in the interviews. According to Riessman (2008), a narrative investigated through the lens of a thematic analysis should concentrate on "what" is said rather than "how," "to whom," or "for what purposes" (p. 53).

Van Manen (1990) observed that "to do human science research is to be involved in the crafting of a text" (p. 78). The researcher takes a significant role in writing the lived experiences of participants. Making sense of a text in a meaningful way requires much reflection on the part of the researcher. It is helpful to categorize the written words into themes in order to provide a reflective interpretation, as Van Manen explained:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure-grasping, and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meaning. Ultimately the concept of theme is rather

irrelevant and may be considered simply as a means to get at the notion we are addressing. Theme gives control and order to our research and writing. (p. 79)

This study adopted Creswell's (2007) data analysis process by organizing the data into themes through a coding process, separating the data into meaningful segments, and naming them according to their main focus. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed. Each interview was read several times to provide for a deeper understanding of participants' insights. As I read the interviews several times, I started categorizing themes and making comparisons to allow for an in-depth analysis of reoccurring themes. I developed a spreadsheet separating each interview question and grouping them according to the themes that had been initially identified. The spreadsheet was printed in large pieces of paper and posted to a large wall. Two of the six themes that had initially been identified were discarded as they became irrelevant when compared to the research questions and purpose of this study. As four themes remained, I employed a color-coding system in which subthemes emerged. After reading through the large pieces of papers on the wall a few more times, themes and subthemes were structured in a coherent way that directly related to the purpose of this study.

The coding process abovementioned was structured carefully to avoid what Miles and Huberman (1994) call "a ragbag that usually induces a shapeless, purely opportunistic analysis" (p. 62). By structuring codes in a coherent way that related directly to the purpose of this study, I was able to easily organize the data as other codes emerged during the data analysis process.

Quality Control or Trustworthiness of the Data

In this study, I utilized triangulation and member checks to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Patton (2002) described triangulation as the combination of two or more sources, emphasizing that “studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data consistency checks” rather than utilizing a single data collection method add to the credibility of the study (p. 248). Themes and patterns from interviews with participants and the academic counselors were compared, as they emerged.

Member checks, also called respondent validation (Schwandt, 2007), were utilized to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These member checks involved follow-up phone interviews with the participants to elicit further information on particular themes that were not substantially developed during the first interview. Member checking also allowed participants to verify the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, which were sent to them via email, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the data (Glesne, 1999).

Researcher’s Role

The conception for this study was born from my own experience as an immigrant in the United States. I am a Brazilian-born American citizen in my early forties. I come from a middle-class family with a very diverse cultural background. My mother’s family is from Lebanon and my father’s family is from Italy.

As a child, my father chose to skip school most days and play soccer instead. Even though he was given opportunities to receive a good education, he favored being outside playing with his friends. Unlike my father, my mother enjoyed studying, but my grandmother could not afford to send her and my aunt to good schools. My grandmother was a single mother in her early twenties who worked long hours to ensure that her two daughters had food on the table and decent clothes. Luckily, public schools in the capital of Sao Paulo, where both my parents grew up, still provided a good education for poor children in the 1940s and 1950s. My father never did finish high school, but my mother completed high school and received a teaching certificate that allowed her to teach elementary school.

Because my mother was a teacher, I inherited her passion for education while I was growing up. As an only child, I was provided with numerous opportunities for education. My mother played a crucial role in ensuring that I not only received good schooling but was also challenged to achieve a higher level of education within my home environment. She had a holistic approach to education and provided me with opportunities beyond the schools' scope of education. I was exposed to an array of situations in which learning could take place. For instance, my birthdays were celebrated with cultural events such as movies, plays, concerts, and reading circles.

My career in adult basic education began when I moved to the United States at the age of 22 to obtain a Master's degree. I was absolutely amazed by the opportunities the United States provides for its citizens to access education, unlike my country of birth. However, the more I researched the issue, the more I learned—to my dismay—that

such opportunities were not being utilized by a large segment of the population, especially those who desperately needed it.

While working as an educator and administrator for a large adult basic education program in an urban area, I came to realize that Hispanic nontraditional adult learners were the largest group of immigrants in need of access to education. However, this group of immigrants was also the least exposed to such educational opportunities, which hindered their chances of pursuing a higher education. More specifically, even though the number of Hispanic women who enrolled in adult education classes was larger than the number of their male counterparts, the number of female students who actually received their GED credential was much lower.

Since I came to that realization, my trajectory as an adult educator and most recently as a researcher has been to investigate the reasons why a large number of Hispanic adult students do not complete a postsecondary education. What is the root of the problem? Why do so many adults lack an education in a country that supposedly provides equal access to all? More importantly, how do Hispanic women who are GED graduates beat the odds and complete postsecondary degrees? I strongly believe that education defines and shapes how I am perceived in the United States as a woman and as an immigrant. With this framework in mind, I am deeply invested in empowering Hispanic women to pursue and complete a higher education. I have experienced how my voice has become “louder” as I have sought to become more educated, which grants me the “power” to question the “status quo.”

In sum, my interest in Mexican women arises from my becoming aware that this immigrant group faces major challenges in the United States, yet not enough effort has been made to address the issues these women face on a daily basis. I hope that my research contributions will serve to inform educational leaders about the changes that must occur to provide a more accessible educational path for Mexican women.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree at a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas. The college is considered a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) because more than 25% of its students identify themselves as Hispanics. Using the conceptual frameworks of persistence theory and resilience theory, the following research questions guided this study: (a) What role do community colleges play in facilitating degree completion by female Mexican GED graduates in the United States? (b) How does their gender influence Mexican women's participation in postsecondary education? (c) What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their pursuit of postsecondary education? (d) How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

This chapter is organized into three main sections. The first section introduces the institutional profile of the community college participants were attending at the time of the interviews. Additionally, the profiles of the participants who were interviewed for their personal insights into their GED and postsecondary experiences are presented. The second section discusses the major themes and subthemes identified from the interviews. The four themes and their subthemes are: (a) *institutional role in Mexican women's persistence in college*, highlighting the contributions the college made to foster

participants' continued enrollment and chapter teacher support and supportive services (b) *barriers to education*, including an array of obstacles participants faced while attending high school and college and how they overcame these obstacles. Subthemes: pregnancy while attending high school, financing postsecondary education, and impact of gender on completing a postsecondary degree (c) *cultural attitudes toward education*, emphasizing how education is perceived in the participants' native culture and the impact such cultural values might have had on their educational pursuits. Subthemes: family views of education, impact of cultural values on postsecondary educational pursuit and (d) *indicators of persistence*, describing how participants managed to remain in school long enough to complete their postsecondary degrees. Subthemes: intrinsic motivation and example for children. The third section highlights insights provided by two academic counselors whose primary role at the institution was to counsel students who fit the criteria used for this study.

Profiles

This section presents the institutional profile of the community college participants were attending at the time this study was conducted. In addition, a profile of each of the 12 participants is presented. These profiles provide background information in order for the reader to become familiar with the institution as well as with the participants of this study.

Institutional Profile

Demographic data for the last two years provided by the institution featured in this study was also reviewed. The data came from the institution's 2012–2013 Fact Book. This report provides information about the institution's student profile, instructional programs, academic achievements, and personnel profile. Most importantly, the report shows the percentage of all students enrolled by race/ethnicity and also the percentage of students who are women.

According to the 2012–2013 Fact Book, the overall Hispanic population at the college during the Fall semester of 2012 was 33%, the same as the percentage of African Americans, while 13% of the students were Asian, 17% were white, and 4% identified themselves as “other” (American Indian, Alaska Native, multi-racial, nonresident alien, and unknown ethnicity). These figures demonstrate that the college's highest percentages of students are Hispanics and African Americans.

Among the students enrolled, 37% were between the ages of 18 and 22; while 34% were between the ages of 23 and 30. These numbers indicated that the institution enrolls a large percentage of students who are in their mid- to late twenties, which are consistent with this study given that ten of the twelve participants interviewed were over the age of twenty-three.

In the Fall semester of 2012, 41% of the students enrolled were male and 59% of the students were female. Of the 19,687 Hispanic students who were enrolled, 11,476 were female and 8,198 were male. Consequently, it is fair to conclude that Hispanic females are attending the college in greater numbers than Hispanic males.

While this report highlights a myriad of student demographic data, it fails to provide statistical data on the number of GED graduates who enroll. It also does not provide female GED graduate numbers; nor does it specify the different countries the Hispanic students in the data come from. Hence, these data do not reveal enough detailed information for a more accurate analysis, which would be most relevant to this research study.

Participant Profiles

This section provides a profile of each of the 12 participants, who all had GED credentials and at the time of the interviews and were about to complete an associate's degree at a two-year community college. The profiles highlight descriptive information concerning their backgrounds to familiarize the reader with their unique educational trajectories. The profiles include demographic information and offer an overview of their socioeconomic statuses. All of the participants profiled in this section selected the pseudonym that is used in their profile. The participants (by pseudonym) were: Angela, Blanca, Christina, Daniela, Gloria, Kyla, Lisa, Maria, Mary, Sally Smith, Sandra, and Yessenia. Table 1 summarizes the demographics for the participants, recorded in alphabetical order.

Table 1 Demographic Profiles of Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Self- identification	Reason for withdrawing from high school	Marital status	Age range	Held a job while in school	Used financial aid to pay for college
Angela	Hispanic	Pregnant	Single	18–25	Yes	Yes
Blanca	Mexican	Too old to go to high school when arrived from Mexico	Single	18–25	Yes	Yes
Daniela	Hispanic	Pregnant	Married	26–30	Yes	Yes
Gloria	Mexican American	Had to take care of one- year old son	Divorced	36–40	Yes	Yes
Kyla	Latina	Pregnant	Single	26–30	Yes	Yes
Lisa	Hispanic	Moved from a foster home to another home	Divorced	26–30	Yes	Yes
Maria	Mexican	Came from Mexico at the age of 16 and could not enroll	Married	31–35	No	No
Mary	Hispanic	Molested by father	Married	36–40	Yes	Yes
Sally Smith	Hispanic	Bullied in school	Single	36–40	No	Yes
Sandra	Mexican American	Had to work to help parents	Single	26–30	Yes	Yes
Yessenia	Mexican	Too old to enroll in high school when arrived from Mexico	Divorced	26–30	No	Yes

Angela

Angela is a 25-year-old woman whose father is from Mexico and whose mother is from El Salvador. She seemed shy and rarely made eye contact while the interview was taking place. It was as if she was embarrassed to be telling her story, even though when she was contacted, she sounded excited about contributing to the study.

Angela has a seven-year old daughter whom she loves very much. She had to drop out of high school when she was in eleventh grade because she was pregnant. She enrolled in a GED preparatory program and was told that she was ready to take the test right away. With her parents' support, she took the GED test and passed it with high scores about one year after she withdrew from high school.

Upon receiving her GED certification, Angela immediately enrolled in college. She was determined to receive a postsecondary education and challenged herself to overcome all obstacles. Her parents were always supportive, even though they did not hold college degrees themselves.

Angela recalls how difficult it was to attend college, hold a job, and raise her daughter while she was still a teenager herself. She said, "I did not like not spending enough time with my daughter." At this point, Angela lowered her voice and paused for a moment, as if she regretted not having time to be with her daughter during the first years of her life.

Angela seemed very detached from her college experience. She was not involved in any extracurricular activities offered by the college, nor had she developed any

friendships. In addition, she did not interact with her professors outside of the classroom since she was always in a hurry to either make it to the next class or to work. The only people she described as being supportive were her parents, who took care of her daughter while she went to school and worked.

Angela's goal is to complete her bachelor's degree in accounting from a local university to which she was considering transferring at the time of the interview. She discussed her plan to join the accounting organization at the university in order to meet people, become involved, and network for future job opportunities. She wants to maintain as high a GPA as possible and to be granted internships in her field of study.

Education is a priority for Angela. At the age of 25 with a seven-year old daughter, she feels more confident and mature than when she was a pregnant 17-year-old who had to withdraw from high school. She has enrolled her daughter in a charter school where her daughter will learn Spanish and Chinese. She wants her daughter to finish high school and to receive a college education before thinking of raising a family. Angela emphasized that she would do whatever she could to prevent her daughter from making the same mistakes she had made during her teenage years.

Angela feels fortunate to have had such open-minded parents. She described the Mexican culture as one in which women usually stay home to take care of their children and husbands. She talked about her grandmother, whose first priority was to take care of the family. In contrast, Angela was raised with the understanding that women can do anything men can do. Her parents always believed that with their support, she could accomplish anything she set her mind to.

Blanca

Blanca has only been in the United States for three and one half years. In her mid-20s, she spoke with enthusiasm about the free educational opportunities she has been able to take advantage of since she moved from Mexico to establish residency in the United States.

Even though she received her high school diploma in Mexico, she was not able to transfer it. When she was told about a GED preparatory program that was free of charge and could grant her an American high school equivalency certification, she enrolled in the program immediately. Blanca spoke very highly of her GED teacher, who encouraged her to take the GED test after only two months of classes—which she did, and she successfully passed. She described her GED preparatory program as if it were her second family. The teacher was very passionate about teaching Blanca and her classmates. It was a family environment where everyone shared a common goal of completing the GED program.

Blanca recalled one instance during her two months in the program when a counselor from a nearby college visited her class to provide an orientation to the different certificates and associate degrees it offered. She described how exciting it was to learn more about further educational opportunities. Blanca asked the college counselor many questions. She was very surprised to learn about financial aid for attending college, and she was amazed by the different services she could utilize if she decided to further her education. She lacked confidence about her English, and spoke

with enthusiasm about the tutoring program that was available. Based on this presentation, she knew she could fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse.

Blanca spoke very highly of her parents, making references to the many sacrifices they made to ensure she could receive an education. Her parents emphasized that receiving an education would be the most important aspect of her life for being successful and making a good living. They are very proud of her as their first child to attend college.

Christina

Christina seemed very proud to say that she is Mexican and was born in Monterrey. She moved to the United States with her family when she was a little girl. She has been living in the United States for 33 years and has two children. Christina dropped out of ninth grade when she became pregnant with her first son, who is now deceased. She spoke of him with tenderness as her two children sat quietly listening to her.

The GED preparatory program was very helpful to Christina because it allowed her to review what she had previously learned while also teaching her new skills to better prepare for the test. She emphasized that the GED program allowed students to work at their own pace. The teacher was always available on a one-on-one basis to assist them. In addition, students were encouraged to work in small groups and help each other. Christina was delighted when her teacher told her she was ready to take the test five weeks after she began the program.

Attending a college fair with her GED teacher and classmates was very exciting to Christina. It was then that she learned about the many different options available to her, including majors, financial aid, day care facilities offered for students, flexible schedules, and weekend classes. Christina realized for the first time that she could manage to attend school while working and taking care of her children. It would not be easy, but there were resources she could utilize for this purpose.

Christina recalls the support she received from her college professors. She felt cared for by her teachers while her son was very ill. When her son passed away as a teenager after struggling with a major disability, Christina was enrolled in four classes. Her professors were very understanding, allowing her to submit her homework late and to take make-up tests. Christina worked hard to pass her classes; however, she acknowledges that if it had not been for her teachers caring so much about her, she would not have been able to continue taking classes during the most difficult time of her life. She was encouraged to continue as she was reminded of how proud her deceased son had been about her goal of earning a college degree.

Daniela

Daniela arrived thirty minutes before the scheduled interview time. She was friendly and seemed interested and honored to be participating in the study. Daniela is married with three children. She has lived in the United States for four years. Her husband did not have a chance to complete high school because he had to work to help his parents. It is essential to Daniela for her three children to not only finish high school, but also earn college degrees.

After becoming pregnant with her first child in her teenage years, Daniela did not go back to school for about ten years, at which point she enrolled in a GED preparatory program where she could study to pass the test. She passed it after taking classes for only three months, which she felt was quite an accomplishment. She knew she had to apply herself to obtain the GED credential in order to attend college. In her mind, there was no option of dropping out again, because she knew she would never return to school if she did.

Daniela was the only participant whose employer was contributing towards her college tuition, and she was very grateful for the financial support she received. However, she was also receiving financial aid from the college, which allowed her to take the classes she needed to graduate. Each semester, Daniela enrolls in two or three classes, depending on her availability. With full-time work, three children, and a husband, she knows she can only handle so much.

Gloria

A Mexican American in her late 30s, Gloria is divorced with five children whose ages range from 6 to 22. She was excited to be interviewed because she felt she was contributing to “a very important study.” She holds a full-time job and takes classes at the local college. Gloria was raised by her grandmother, who passed away when she was in high school. Since Gloria no longer had her grandmother’s help, her main support system disappeared and she had to withdraw from high school to take care of her daughter, who was one year old at the time

After working for two years while raising her daughter, Gloria learned about a free GED preparatory program. She started taking classes to prepare for the test, which she passed three months after she enrolled in the program. To Gloria, the GED program was very helpful. She recalls how caring her teacher was, even helping her to raise money to pay for the test since Gloria was struggling financially. Although Gloria seemed ashamed that she had trouble paying for the GED test, she expressed her gratitude that her teacher had helped her obtain the necessary funds.

Gloria's very high scores on the GED earned her a scholarship and tuition help at the local college, where she started taking classes. She was amazed by the opportunities presented to her. It was the only way she could finance her education while working full-time and raising her children on her own.

After dropping out for a year while going through a difficult divorce, Gloria returned to college, determined to complete her degree. She realized that taking more than three classes each semester was too much, since she also had to continue working full-time while raising her children. Like her, Gloria's two oldest children now hold jobs and attend classes at the local college. Gloria is aware that she has set a good example for her children, which is her main motivation for completing her college degree.

Kyla

Articulate and assertive, Kyla is a single mother in her late 20s. She dropped out of high school in her junior year when she was pregnant with her first child. She now has three children ranging in age from seven months to thirteen years. Kyla recalls her experiences as a student with enthusiasm.

Kyla enjoys her college experience. She spoke highly of each department, explaining how helpful they were to her. Learning how to navigate the college system was new and scary to Kyla. The counseling and financial staff advised her on how to fill out forms, register for classes, and buy books, indicated how many classes to take each semester, and taught her how to develop her degree plan, which she revised a few times before she was certain about her major.

The first member of her family to attend college, Kyla talked about being an example for her children. Her teenage son is clearly proud of her accomplishments, as he talks about his own plans for college in the future. Kyla plans for all three of her children to attend college and be employed before starting a family.

Lisa

Lisa is a soft-spoken, shy woman in her late 20s. She is divorced and has one daughter. When asked why she decided to take the GED, she indicated that it was not her choice. She wishes she could have finished high school with her class.

Being a foster child during her teenage years was difficult for Lisa. She recalls how she had to move from foster home to foster home. In the end, she was not able to finish high school and was told by her foster parents that she needed to obtain a GED certificate. Her tone of voice changed when she described how she would have preferred to go back to high school rather than take the GED test. Lisa sounded angry as she elaborated on how much she had wanted to finish high school but was not allowed to do so.

Lisa's realization that she had to work full-time so that she could afford living on her own was the main reason she agreed to take the GED test. Additionally, she knew that she could only attend college if she obtained such a credential. Although she scored high on the test, Lisa confessed that she is still embarrassed when she is asked about her credentials. She worries that because she did not graduate from high school, she might not graduate from college.

Although Lisa is determined to complete college, she had to drop out for almost two years for financial reasons. Since she has been on her own, the combination of raising her daughter, working full-time, and going to school proved to be more than she could handle for a while. It was when her daughter reached school age that Lisa decided to return to school herself and graduate.

Lisa's strong desire to help others has helped her to become deeply involved in academic life. She talks with excitement about the many volunteering experiences she has had with different college committees at the college. Being part of the college community has given Lisa a sense of belonging, which in turn is making it easier for her to enjoy college life as a whole.

Maria

Raised in Mexico until she was 16 years old, Maria claims she was not able to enroll in high school in the United States because she did not have her middle-school report card from Mexico. After working for two years while improving her English language skills, Maria decided to take the GED test. She enrolled in a GED preparatory school for three months before she was ready to take the test.

Once Maria obtained her GED credential, she realized she was not ready to attend an English-speaking college, as English was a difficult language for her when she first moved to the United States. Improving her English as well as raising her children became Maria's main focus for many years. While driving her children to school one day, she ran into an acquaintance who told her about a new community college campus that had opened in their neighborhood a few months earlier.

Although Maria had doubts about going back to school because of her family, she decided to talk to her husband about it. To her surprise, he was very encouraging and told her he would be able to pay for her to take two classes each semester, which she has been doing for two years now. She utilizes the tutoring and counseling centers at the college when she needs help. Her children and husband are proud of her, and at the time of the interview, she was planning to graduate with an associate's degree in 2014.

Mary

Mary is a married woman in her late 30s. She does not have any children. Sounding assertive and determined, she recalled the reasons why she had to withdraw from high school as being painful and disheartening; she lowered her voice to say she had been molested by her own father a few times when she was a child. In contrast, she spoke enthusiastically about the option of taking the GED.

Mary, who had been a very good student in high school, pointed out that getting married while she was still in her teens was a big mistake. She had to work full-time and was not supported by her husband to continue her studies. Even though she had a strong

desire to attend college, she always found herself having to take care of the home and help her husband, who was not able to keep a job for an extended period of time.

It was only many years later, when Mary was divorced, that she realized that her ex-husband had been the main obstacle preventing her from furthering her education. However, her determination to earn a college degree was very much alive, as she felt that no one could stop her from achieving her educational goals. It was then that Mary decided she would attend an orientation at the nearby college to learn more about what it took to be a college student.

Although it has been more than 10 years since Mary first enrolled, she claims that her participation in different organizations is what keeps her connected to the college community. She enjoys being the president of Phi Beta Kappa because she is able to help other students succeed. Mary discussed how the club was a wonderful support system for her when she first joined. She also stated that being involved in different volunteering groups at the college has taught her how to develop healthy relationships and deal with conflict. She is very grateful for the opportunities and stated emphatically that she does not take anything for granted.

Sally Smith

Sally Smith was the only participant who chose to add a last name when asked for a pseudonym. She has never been married and does not have any children. Even though she did not know it at the time, she is now certain that she withdrew from high school because she was bullied.

While her single mother talked about college as the only option, Sally Smith did not receive the support needed at home during her high school years. She claims that she did not have a very supportive family and therefore she chose to leave home when she was 16. There were many obstacles for Sally Smith when she left her parents' home. She had not completed high school and had to work full-time to pay her bills. Determined to continue her education, she enrolled in a GED preparatory program in the evenings. Sally Smith took classes for three months before she took the exam. She enrolled in college that same year, but dropped out before the end of her first semester.

A slow, difficult start is how Sally Smith describes her first year in college. She was very young and lacked self-esteem. She recalls how afraid she was about being on her own at such a young age. For many of her college years, Sally Smith struggled to stay in school. She always seemed to find a reason to drop out, knowing deep inside that she just could not cope with the combination of college life, work, and supporting herself financially. Her main reason for returning to college each time she did was her hope for a better future. Once Sally Smith realized that she should only take one or two classes each semester, she was able to stay in school and complete her classes.

Sandra

A Mexican American in her late 20s, Sandra was proud to say that she also self-identifies as a Native American. She spoke with sadness about having to withdraw from high school to work full-time to help her parents. The need to bring additional income to the household was more important than continuing her education at that time.

Sandra admits that it took her about 10 years to return to school. The GED preparatory classes were very helpful to her, as they provided a major review of the material she had not studied since she had dropped out of high school. She spoke fondly of her two GED instructors, who were always available to answer questions and to go the extra mile to ensure students had learned the material. The encouragement Sandra felt was motivation enough to get her through the material and receive her GED credentials with high scores.

When discussing support services at the college, Sandra's demeanor changed and her facial expression showed disappointment and anger. She said that she was lost when she first started college. The unfamiliar system was difficult to navigate during her first semester. Not being aware of financial aid and the many other services provided at the college to facilitate enrollment and continuity was very frustrating to Sandra. She pointed out that students should receive a more detailed orientation in order to learn about all the services that are available to them.

Yessenia

Born and raised in Mexico, Yessenia has been in the United States for about 12 years. She left Mexico as a pregnant woman on her own after she heard she could attend high school for free if she could cross the border. Unfortunately, upon her arrival in the United States, she realized she needed to learn English before she could attend any school. With a small child and no one to support them financially, Yessenia found full-time work and a day care center for her daughter, and she managed to study English on her own when her daughter was asleep.

Years went by before Yessenia was able to enroll in a GED preparatory program. With limited English proficiency and a fear of being discovered as undocumented, she had delayed seeking help for enrolling in school. Yet, at the time of the interview she felt very comfortable in disclosing her immigration status. She was the only participant who offered this information. By that time, she was over 21 and therefore not allowed to attend high school. Attending GED classes was a very rewarding experience for Yessenia. She met people of all ages, learned from them, and came to the realization that if she tried hard she could do whatever she wanted to better her life and the lives of her two daughters.

Six years have passed since Yessenia took her first college class. She is about to receive an associate's degree, which she is very proud to have completed. While she recalls many challenges she has faced since moving to the United States, she is very grateful for the few individuals who have helped her succeed. She plans to enroll soon at the local university to receive a bachelor's degree. When asked about her future goals, she emphasized that she wants to ensure her daughters have a chance to study and better themselves before starting a family. She was emphatic about teaching her girls not to make the same mistakes she had made.

Presentation of Findings

The following section presents the overall analysis associated with the data gathered from the interviews with the study's participants. A discussion of each identified theme and subthemes is followed by relevant segments of the interviews that

are reflective of each identified theme and subthemes. Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes of this study.

Table 2 Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Institutional Role in Mexican Women's Persistence in College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher Support - Supportive Services
Barriers to Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pregnancy while attending high school - Financing postsecondary education - Impact of gender on completing a postsecondary degree
Cultural Attitudes Toward Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family views of education - Impact of cultural values on postsecondary educational pursuit
Indicators of Persistence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intrinsic motivation - Example for children

Institutional Role in Mexican Women's Persistence in College

In this study, participants were asked to elaborate on the role their college had in facilitating completion of their degrees. Seeking to understand how students are supported when attending classes at a community college, I asked participants to describe the college support services they utilized and how these support services impacted their persistence. In addition, I asked participants to describe their interactions with the staff and administration in all support areas of the college. Under this theme, I examined the support systems provided by the college that the respondents utilized to

assist them in navigating the academic world. This theme corresponds to the research question: What role do community colleges play in facilitating degree completion by female Mexican GED graduates in the United States? The two subthemes that emerged under this theme are: *teacher support* and *support services*.

Teacher Support

Having supportive teachers was a common theme discussed by nine of the twelve respondents. Teachers who showed an interest in students' academic lives were essential in contributing to their successful college experience.

Although most participants reflected on the many challenges they faced while attending college, there was a consensus that teachers made a substantial difference by providing the support they needed to persist and complete their degrees. When asked to describe her supportive professors, Yessenia said,

Oh, they're good professors. They were good professors. Yeah, for the degree that I have, this lady, my instructor, oh, my gosh, she's awesome. She really helped us to get through the program in order for us to graduate. She would explain and she would come Saturdays to open the lab for us to learn and, you know, you had to review cancer cells and leukemia cells and all these type of cells that are really weird. So she would come and help us to do that. She was very helpful.

Similarly, Mary added,

They are ... you know, they are there when I need them. I cannot ask for ... I feel like I am very blessed and I mean the college has great teachers, honestly. I have

had some wonderful professors that honestly.... I have had so many really supportive professors and they have been supportive in different ways, like my biology teacher, he was completely supportive throughout biology and he also gave me my letter of recommendation for Phi Beta Kappa which put me on another.... So almost every one of my professors have been wonderful and supportive and encouraging and, I mean, I have always have good relationships with my professors, like maybe because I am a little older and I am more on their level, as you know.

These accounts indicate the pivotal role teachers play in helping their students in college. Yessenia referred to her most supportive teacher as the one who helped her get through her program. Mary described how helpful most of her professors were as she recalled having good relationships with them as a mature adult student.

Likewise, Christina reflected on a very challenging time when her son was terminally ill while she was attending college. Her account of how supportive her teachers were shows the extent to which they were willing to help her successfully complete her classes. Christina noted,

And the fact that the teachers are, like, really under—like all the teachers that I’ve had have always been understanding and, you know, until, like I said, my son recently passed away in February so while I was in class, like, my teacher would tell me, “Well, don’t worry about coming to class. Just take your time or....” When my son was sick in the hospital, they would just tell me, “We’ll mail you your assignments” and things like that. But I would still show up. Yeah,

and so, but, because I had the support of the teachers and the teachers were there and understanding, and the fact that, you know, I did everything that I could, you know, to pass all my classes, I think that was one of the resources, just like the teachers themselves, you know?

Christina emphasized that there was a sense of community among her teachers who understood she was committed to her education but was going through a challenging personal time. Receiving the support from her teachers gave Christina the motivation she needed to continue taking classes while her son was ill.

Kyla discussed at length the qualities a supportive teacher must have to help her understand the material. She noted,

I think my professors are good. I think they are ... you know, they have been really firm on their rules and policies and ... and things like that. I ... I know some of them were really, really, you know they instructed well, but I ... I have had, you know, a few bad experiences where I did not grasp the information. I would say my most supportive teacher would be breaking down the information for me, allow me to apply that to real life even if it was, you know, in the past that I am learning about. It still applied to me today so that would have been ... that would be my description of ... of that professor. Yeah. I had a history professor that, you know, really broke it down for me and then gave me material that were in all aspects, like, not just read a book. It was do this, you know, and do that. Do this quiz and complete this research paper and so it was all aspects of ... of the history and so that is why I was able to grasp it better.

Along the same lines, Gloria said, “The learning. I mean, because you do, the college does have good instructors, and there are some that really ... that do know how to teach, and you learn from what they’re teaching.”

These narratives emphasize the importance of having caring teachers. Participants’ descriptions of the degree to which their teachers helped them underscore the crucial role the institution plays in fostering a supportive, safe, and motivational college environment.

Supportive Services

Support services are provided by community colleges in the United States to encourage, motivate, and support students. The main support services discussed by participants in this study were: academic counseling, financial aid, and tutoring labs.

Many of the participants described counseling as one of the main departments that provided them with assistance. Gloria noted,

Counselors answered the questions that I’ve actually run into. The staff, and especially with me working at the college, I’ve learned more about how their system is, and who to go to, and I’ve never had a problem where no one knows how to answer my questions.

Similarly, Sally Smith added,

I’ve used counselors, you know, in trying to determine a major. I’ve changed majors a couple of times, and then, of course, they tell you what’s mandated as far as what to take and not spin your wheels too long.

Gloria and Sally Smith commented on the help they received from the academic counselors at the college, whose assistance was instrumental in determining their degree plans. Academic counselors were able to clarify many of their questions and organize their academic lives.

Another support service greatly utilized by the participants in this study—eight out of the twelve—was tutoring. Sandra observed,

Definitely the tutoring center. Some of the people there are extremely helpful, and you know, like, if you need help like writing a paper, you need certain books, they were very helpful and helped me obtain the books and whatnot. I attended the math lab for tutoring and they were extremely helpful there as well. I never had to attend like English lab or anything. I never needed help writing papers. It was always just math and just help with, like, research.

Along the same lines, Lisa said,

As far as the labs and tutoring, I've recently started doing it because, you know, it is available to you and it's very helpful. I mean, if you really apply yourself and, you know, it's a definite push for you to do it. I recommend it because it's, for one, you don't have to, if you don't have access to a computer, you know, there's computer labs. You know, and then there's always somebody there, if there's something you're missing or something you can't do or don't know how to do, they can help you.

These descriptions emphasize the need for support services to foster participants' persistence in college. Academic counseling and tutoring were the two main kinds of

assistance mentioned that enhanced participants' chances of continuing their postsecondary education to completion.

Barriers to Education

As immigrants in the United States, Mexican women face many barriers to education. Most participants in the study revealed that they had to overcome several obstacles to complete their GED certification and postsecondary education. This section explores in more detail the struggles faced by the participants, who ultimately accomplished their goals of completing two-year degrees. The theme of barriers to education and its subthemes (*pregnancy while attending high school, financing postsecondary education, and impact of gender on completing a postsecondary degree*) were primarily discussed in addressing one of this study's four research questions: How does their gender influence Mexican women in their participation in postsecondary education?

Pregnancy while Attending High School

One of the main reasons participants dropped out of high school was becoming pregnant at an early age. Half of the respondents in the study observed that being pregnant and/or having a child prevented them from completing high school during their teenage years. When asked why she did not complete high school, Gloria said,

I was raised by my grandmother, and she had passed away when I was actually in the eleventh grade, which made it hard for me to continue school because I had a one-year-old, which she was helping raise. So at the time that she passed I had to

take full responsibility for my daughter at the time, so I had to get out of school and start working.

Gloria had been fortunate enough to be raised by a grandmother who encouraged her to stay in school after she gave birth to her first child. Unfortunately, with the passing of her grandmother, who had been taking care of her daughter, Gloria had to drop out of high school when she was in 11th grade.

Unlike Gloria, a few of the participants did not receive support from family members when they became pregnant during their high school years. For instance, Christina shared,

I dropped out of ninth grade because I became, I was pregnant with my first son who is now deceased, but I was pregnant and so I just quit school. And I tried to go back to night school, but it wasn't working for me, taking too long.

Similarly, Daniela commented, "I got pregnant with my son at a young age, so I left school to take care of him." Kyla also shared that her reason for withdrawing from high school was that "I became pregnant when I was in junior high or the beginning of high school, and that caused me to drop out."

Of the twelve women in the study, five reported the reason they had to quit high school was that they became pregnant with their first child.

Financing Postsecondary Education

Financing their postsecondary education while raising their children as single mothers was one of the main obstacles reported by the participants. Nine out of the

twelve participants pointed out that without financial aid, they would not have been able to continue attending college. For instance, Mary said,

I had financial aid last year and the year before I got a grant, so that did help a lot. That was a very big help for me to get my foot in the door, to get started, to get motivated. You know, that really helped.

Mary spoke appreciatively about the opportunity to apply for financial aid and grants. She smiled as she described how having money available to pay for school was the motivation she needed to do well and remain in school. She admitted there were times when she felt she could not cope, but the fact that she had been granted loans forced her to think positively and to never give up.

Similarly, Christina stated,

I guess the resources that I've used is, like, the financial aid because, you know, without that I wouldn't be able to pay for my classes. And I guess just the security of knowing that they have a childcare program. You know? And knowing that if I need it, I know that those services will be there.

Even though it took Christina many years to enroll in college after she obtained her GED credential, she emphasized that she would not have been able to attend classes without financial help. A single mother with three children, she is grateful for the services the college provides such as financial aid, childcare, and tutoring labs. Knowing that she can count on these services has contributed to her remaining in school.

Unlike Mary and Christina, Yessenia was very afraid to pursue her education after she moved to the United States from Mexico. As an undocumented immigrant, she

assumed she would not be able to qualify for financial aid until her immigration papers were in good standing. After she discussed her situation with her friends, they told her she could attend a free GED preparatory program. Yessenia was hesitant, but agreed to visit the school to learn more about her eligibility. She was pleasantly surprised when she was told she could take a test to assess her skills for placement despite her immigration status. It was then that she learned she could apply for financial aid to take college classes once she passed her GED test. With clear excitement, Yessenia shared,

The lady that deals with undocumented students, she is really nice. I mean she is really helpful. She is always there to support you and tell you, “Okay, you can do it. I mean, just bring the paperwork that I’m asking for, and I’ll make sure, you know, that the offices that give the financial aid, they will review it, and if you qualify, then you will get it.” And she has been mainly my support.

I did not ask participants to disclose their immigrant status, and Yessenia was the only participant who discussed her immigration status openly during the interview. She realized how lucky she was to have learned about the many opportunities available to her.

Gloria’s challenges in paying for her education prevented her from enrolling in college as soon as she obtained her GED credential. She shared,

Some of the barriers were basically, like, paying for the exams, the exams that you’re supposed to take. I’m not sure what the name of the exam is now, but you have to take it before you can be admitted.... Yes, it’s the COMPASS test. There you go. Back then. I’m not sure if it’s still the same way now, but that was a

challenge for me because of the fees that they were asking for. And that's what literally, you know, retained me from actually doing it sooner.

As a divorced woman with a small child, Gloria could not afford to take the college entrance exam. Along with the other challenges she faced, such as transportation and babysitting, paying for college was what stopped her from furthering her education at that time. When asked about what college support services she had used when she enrolled, she said, "Financial aid is the main one. And, you know, the counseling, also, but mainly the financial aid is what has actually helped me go forward with my education."

Without the assistance of financial aid, nine of the twelve participants interviewed would not have been able to afford college. Most elaborated on their lack of financial resources given their life circumstances at the time they completed their GED certification and were ready to enroll in college.

Impact of Gender on Completing a Postsecondary Degree

Substantiating the fact that all participants of this study are women, discussions around gender were observed. It was clear through most participants' voices that being female presented challenges for accomplishing their educational pursuits. Mostly, their gender was viewed as one of the inhibiting factors delaying their goals of furthering their education to postsecondary degree completion. Being a single woman with children and having to work to support the family was a common theme in the respondents' narratives. For instance, Gloria commented,

I think it's made an impact just by being a woman, I mean, because really, a lot of women don't get the opportunity to do their education because they're housewives and they're moms at the time or because of their income, and nowadays, I mean, the way I see it, women are more out there than men.

Example: Women are doing men's jobs now, you know, so I see it a very big hit for a woman to get their education.

Interestingly, Gloria is proud to say that she was able to pursue her education even though she faced major challenges as a single mother. She emphasized that women are strong and they can do the same jobs as men. According to Gloria, it is important and empowering for women to receive an education, as they can achieve whatever goals they set for themselves.

Kyla discussed early motherhood as a hindrance to completing high school and postsecondary education by the age of 22, as she had planned to do before she became pregnant. Kyla noted,

I think if I was not a mother I would have been able to, as young as I was, I would have been able to complete high school and I would have been able to have that college experience. You know, I am 30 and I am barely achieving something a 21- or a 22-year-old would be, so that ... it is always easier for men. If the father of my child had raised her, I am sure he would have found someone to take care of her so he could go on with his life. It is just the way it is.

Similarly, Sandra emphasized, referring to her boyfriend,

Because, like, let's say, you know, if I went around, you know, I had my kid and something happened to me and I wasn't around, he would have his parents to depend on for him to take care of our child, and he could continue to go to school. And I know it's different for everybody, but it's always been just more so that for males it's always been more encouraged for males than for females. And being, you know, Mexican American, I know there's that stereotype, but ... and both of my parents are from Mexico.

The participants' perspectives on how being a woman impacts their educational experience demonstrate that gender issues are still a challenge for women's ability to accomplish their goals. Their comments highlight the idea that being a man would have made their lives easier with respect to furthering their education, even if they had a child to raise.

Additionally, the stereotype that Mexican women are raised to be housewives was still discussed by the respondents. Lisa, who is in her late 20s, divorced, and a mother of one, noted,

I guess, like, within Hispanic-wise, I know the way I was taught and raised is, you know, we're wives and we're mothers. And, you know, we never saw, 'Oh, you see over there? She's a doctor.' Or 'Your grandmother was this.' You always hear about the greatness that, you know, our women in our family did as far as the home was concerned, not on the outside. And that's in every race and you know I think [laughter] just that, you know, you have every opportunity. Every opportunity.

Lisa's insights into how women are perceived in the Hispanic environment are important to note. She describes how she was raised with the understanding that women should stay home and take care of the home and the family. Lisa observed that women were discussed as being great mothers and wives, but not as good doctors or anything else related to a career outside of the home.

Cultural Attitudes Toward Education

This section presents the third theme, *cultural attitudes toward education*. It describes how education was viewed by the participants' family members when they were growing up and also discusses how cultural values have supported and/or challenged the participants' college experiences. Supporting data are presented under two subthemes: *family views of education* and *impact of cultural values on postsecondary educational pursuit*. This section addresses the research question: What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their postsecondary educational pursuit?

Family Views of Education

When asked how their family members viewed education while they were growing up, most participants indicated receiving some support from their families with respect to education. Blanca was emphatic about her parents' views. She said,

They always tell me, my parents, they always tell me, like, the best thing I can get from them is an education. Maybe they can give me a car, they can give me a house and everything, but they give me my education because that's the best

future they can give me to be a successful person. Usually we were very poor over there, so they had to sell things to send me to school. So that's why I always feel like I want to get the most I can so I can show them, like, they are poor, what they are doing is really helpful for me.

Likewise, Gloria shared,

Yes. Yes. Fortunately, yes. We were encouraged to continue school and stuff. Never did we have to stop, I mean, a lot of Hispanic families, you know, their sons or daughters drop out of school early to help the family and stuff. But never, never was that in my situation, thank God.

The comments made by Blanca and Gloria indicate that they grew up in supportive environments. They were encouraged to obtain an education as their first priority. Even though Blanca's parents struggled financially, they always found a way to keep their children in school. In the same way, Gloria is very thankful that she did not have to drop out to help her family, a practice that is common among Hispanic families.

In addition to their parents' support, many respondents reported that the most supportive person in their lives was their significant other. Mary said,

I had somebody that was really supportive that was with me and encouraged me to do what my dreams were. My dream has always been to have a good education and mainly a supportive relationship. I think it was very, very important for me to feel like I have what it ... to finish, you know, because that is what I needed. I needed to have somebody to push me to finish, and still he is very supportive. I am a member of all of these organizations and he helps me and

says, “Your school is first. If this job is taking too much out of you, you quit and you finish school.”

Similarly, Sandra commented on how supportive her boyfriend was:

And so, of course, when you have someone that, you know, has those same goals as you do and that’s going to encourage you and motivate you, you’re going to tough it out, no matter how hard it gets. He is also in college and is always telling me not to stop, to keep going. I guess because we are all on the same boat.

Receiving support from loved ones has made a significant difference in the participants’ educational experiences. Because they felt supported and encouraged to keep moving forward in their educational pursuits, Mary and Sandra persisted long enough in college to obtain a two-year degree.

In substantiating their families’ views about the importance of education, some participants briefly referred to the cultural values of Hispanic families. For instance, Daniela emphasized how strict her father was about schoolwork, noting, “My father was strict about, you know, doing our homework, making sure we understood. My father himself completed the GED because he also got married at an early age, so ... but he was very strong on education.” These comments show that while Mexican cultural values are still present in the lives of the respondents, education was viewed as very important in the homes where these women were brought up. Remarkably, a great majority of the participants’ parents did not complete high school. However, there has recently been a noticeable shift in how education is viewed. Perhaps this is due to the fact that life has been very challenging for those who lack education. It has become more

apparent, even to the less educated, that education is a crucial ingredient for improving one's quality of living.

Impact of Cultural Values on Postsecondary Educational Pursuit

To further understand the impact culture might have had on postsecondary education enrollment and completion, I asked participants to describe how their cultural values have supported and/or challenged their college experience. Notably, all twelve participants were quite willing to express their views on this issue.

When it comes to cultural values and their impact on women's education, most respondents readily agreed that they did not feel pressured to conform to the Mexican cultural norms of past generations. Angela discussed the culture and compared her generation to her grandmother's. She noted,

Well, the culture ... but my parents did not raise me that way so it does not really apply to me. That is why ... I know my ... well, my grandma ... that is how my grandma is. She stays home, takes care of the men. First priority is take care of your husband, but I was not raised that way so it really does not apply to me.

Women can do anything men can do.

Angela compared her role as a woman to that of her grandmother. Interestingly, it seems that women's priorities have shifted somewhat from Angela's account of what they were when she was raised. While her grandmother was a stay-at-home mother and wife, Angela was allowed to attend school and follow her dreams.

Sandra spoke of the stereotype within the Mexican culture. She described her mother's support in trying to steer her away from becoming a housewife for life. She observed,

I mean, well, there was always that stereotype, but my mother always pushed us away from that stereotype. She was always, you know, "You can do anything you set your mind to," and "Every action that you have has a consequence," so, you know, "Do you want to get married and have babies and not do anything for the rest of your life?" Or, "Do you want to pursue other opportunities, go to school?" You know?

Luckily, Sandra felt her mother's support for her attending school and pursuing her education as a child and a young adult. Even though she became pregnant while in high school, she was certain that she would graduate from college one day.

Unlike Angela and Sandra, a few other participants faced challenges at home. Their accounts describe how women and men are viewed differently based on their culture's values. For instance, Mary noted,

Yeah. I think that ... I mean I believe that culturally men are ... are looked at differently than females. Women are supposed to take care of the house, wash dishes, take care of the kids. Kids are supposed to be seen and not heard and males have more freedom than women. I was not supposed to talk on the phone to my friends or go out or ... which did not help me. I ended up rebelling against that.

Along the same lines, Gloria discussed the difference between men and women, which led to her divorce:

The way they see it is women are made for home, you know. You're supposed to stay home, take care of the family, you know, take care of the husband and stuff like that. So mine is in between. So it hasn't helped too much, you know, that was kind of what led to my divorce, too, was because I wanted to continue—I didn't want to be a housewife. You know? I wanted to be the housewife-mom and work. You know? And be a business woman. And so that kind of, you know, led my way towards divorce.

Although both Mary and Gloria emphasized how women and men were viewed differently within the traditional Mexican culture, they rebelled against the stereotypes to follow their dreams of pursuing their education. Gloria had felt imprisoned by her husband who did not allow her to work outside the home. Once her children were older, she felt the urge to go back to school.

In contrast, a few of the participants—mostly those raised by interracial families—expressed mixed feelings about the impact of their culture on their educational journey. Sally Smith elaborated on the cultural differences between her mother and her father. She stated,

I think, ah, I don't really identify with, personally, with the cultural heritage, that I do know that, for example, my mother's Caucasian and I think that's just, if I could generalize, I think Caucasians find education to be maybe more important than the other side of my family, which is Mexican. So my father, although he

never discouraged school or anything, he never, he is a very, you know, laissez faire attitude. So there was not, you know, it didn't really make a difference to him one way or the other. So, you know, when one of your parents is ... doesn't see something as a big deal, then it's hard to see something as a big deal. Especially as a child or, you know, as a young ... a young adult. So I think that culturally, you know, I had, you know, one culture saying, you know, "Do it." And, "But I'm not really sure how." And the other culture, you know, "Find your own way." And the other culture, it's just not important.

Similarly, Yessenia added,

Because, you know, in my mom's side, they believed that if you're a girl, you shouldn't go to school. You should find a husband that has a good economic status, get married, have kids, and have your husband get in some kind of business for you so that you can, you know, if you want to do something, they might get a convenience store or something for you. And, you know, mainly you have to be a woman of the house, which, I mean, at that time, when I was a kid, I never thought about that. And my stepdad said, who is white, you know, he has supported me a lot because he told me that your education is the most important thing. It's the only thing that can make you get successful in life if you know how to ... how to pursue yourself, and how to go to where you want to be.

For Sally Smith and Yessenia, growing up in an interracial environment posed some challenges. On the one hand, they felt supported by one parent who encouraged

education. On the other hand, cultural norms were emphasized by the other parent, preventing the participants from being fully supported at home.

The accounts described under this theme indicate that cultural norms that were once established to differentiate men from women are no longer followed in most Hispanic households. In recent years, the idea that women must stay at home while men are the only ones allowed to work outside the home is no longer prevalent in the Hispanic household.

Indicators of Persistence

This section details the participants' responses describing how they persisted long enough in their educational pursuits to reach postsecondary degree completion. It discusses supporting ideas under two subthemes: *intrinsic motivation* and *example for children*. This theme addresses the research question: How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

Intrinsic Motivation

A consistent theme expressed by the respondents was that their motivation to further their education came from within. While many reported that family and friends were supportive of their educational pursuits, most emphasized that their desire to better themselves came from their own drive and commitment to succeed. When asked to name supportive people or systems that had helped her to remain in college, Sandra stated,

And everything that I've learned, I've learned on my own. I learned how to type on my own, to use a computer on my own. Um, my personal opinion, it's not so

much, like, how you have a piece of paper that says you graduated or not, it's how you carry yourself and how far you're willing to take yourself to get ahead in life. Even when I was pregnant up until even my, like, the semester I had my child, I was taking online classes. I even sat an in-person class. I made arrangements with the professor to miss, you know, X amount of time, and, you know, fortunately, I had a really great professor that semester, and they worked very well with me to continue my studies while I had my kid.

Along the same lines, Yessenia observed,

I don't know, it's just sometimes hard to be a single mom and go to college. I mean, it's really hard. Really hard. In my situation it was, you know, triple hard as for everybody else because I would have to pay out of my pocket for my food. You know? Or I had friends, and I would have to talk to them, and they would help me to get my books through their financial aid, which I was like, "Oh, man." But you know, when you want something so bad, you can always do it.

Yessenia spoke at length about how challenging it was for her to remain in school due to her being a single mother with two children. She claimed she was not ready to take care of her children at such an early age, but had no other option. Despite the fact that Yessenia felt all had worked against her, she remained strong as she continued making great strides to accomplish her goal of obtaining a postsecondary degree.

Kyla, in explaining her reasons for furthering her education, started by saying that she did not feel pressure from her family. However, she placed pressure on herself

to follow through with her plan of completing a two-year degree and eventually transferring to a university. She noted,

I do not feel pressured. I have this self I guess ... it is kind of ... I hold myself to higher expectations now that I am learning, you know, more things and now that I know there is ... there is better things out there. That is ... that is what I want for myself and for my children and for their children.

According to Kyla, she has held increasingly higher expectations of herself as she moves forward with her education. The more she learns, the more motivated she becomes to learn in order to improve her life and that of her children.

Overall, there was a general understanding that intrinsic motivation is very important. Of the twelve participants interviewed, eight claimed that one of the main reasons why they persisted in school was their own motivation to obtain a degree.

Ultimately, a postsecondary diploma means better job opportunities along with a more comfortable future for their families. Seeking to further understand why respondents remained in school despite facing adversity, I asked them to elaborate on the reasons why they persisted through degree completion. Mary said, "I think that was really personal. I mean, my own personal motivation was to have my degree. I did not have any support at the time. It was my own motivation really." Similarly, Sally Smith answered, "Because I wanted a better life for myself. Yeah, that's the only reason. I want a better life for me. You know, you have to want it for yourself first."

Example for Children

Along with intrinsic motivation, one of the main reasons discussed by participants for persisting in school was the premise that children will follow their parents' paths when they grow up. In most cases, this would cause their children to approve by perhaps emulating their parents. When asked how being a mom had impacted her educational experience, Gloria stated,

It's motivated me to actually, like, continue with my education because of my children because I don't want them to feel embarrassed or to ask me, you know, did you graduate, or did you go to college, and then have the excuse, "Well, my mom didn't do it, so why am I going to do it?" So that's why I continue to ... and I wanted to break the chain, too, because I was. When I was born, my mom was only 12 years old, so she was a baby herself. She didn't graduate. Like up to now, if you put a paper in front of her, she can't read and write. You know. You have to read it to her and stuff like that, so I make the decision of not continuing that chain with my children.

Breaking the cycle of illiteracy in her family was a priority for Gloria. She grew up with a mother who could not read nor write, which made her realize how important it is to get an education. At an early age, Gloria had decided that she would face and overcome all barriers to graduating from college. Once she had children, it became even more important to her to obtain a degree. Her comments clearly indicate that her primary motivation to persist and complete college is directly related to her children.

Along the same lines, Yessenia emphasized that having a higher education degree would allow her to send her children to college. She said,

I think it's the one that has impacted my education the most. It is because of my girls, more than anything, that I want to be successful in life and have a higher degree than the one I have, so that I can provide them with a good lifestyle as well as the money in order for them to go to college, if they don't qualify for financial aid. You never know. So I want to be prepared for that, because I don't want them to go through everything that I had to go through, you know, because it was really hard to get ... because they see it. You don't have to tell them. My old girl, she goes ... she's about to go to seventh grade, and she's so proud of her mommy. She will tell everybody, the teachers, everybody knows, "Oh, my mommy graduated. She's a lab technician. She's going to school again because she wants to go to university."

Clearly, Yessenia's children are proud of her for going to school. They see that she has a purpose in life as she works hard to have a career. Her daughters enjoy talking to their friends about what they want to become when they grow up. It is by example that Yessenia instills into her children's minds the importance of not just going to school, but remaining in school until they complete a higher education degree.

Similarly, Christina observed that her reasons for going to school are her children. She said,

I think that they are my reason, my kids are my reasons for going to school, because I want to, because as a mom, I have to let my kids know that if I can

work two jobs and go to school and make good grades, you are able to go to school and that's it, you should have no excuse for making bad grades. And they encourage me, you know, and they motivate me because I'm trying to prove a point to them, that at the same time I'm doing it to better my family situation financially. So ... and my kids are the reason, they're the reason I do everything, especially in school.

According to Christina, her children are her priority in life, even more so when it comes to school. She emphasized that because she sets an example for her children by studying hard and making good grades, they must do the same. There are no excuses for not doing well in school.

Interestingly, Sandra spoke more critically of the lack of education in her family. She noted that she is the first member of her family to attend college:

And I mean I've read that when you have your parents who have college educations, like, it just, it continues. And other than my mother, like no one else in my family, like not even like aunts, uncles, you know, on both my mother and my father's side, have really obtained an actual education. I mean, and it's different because all my dad's family's in Mexico, and so he's the only one who's here, but my mom only has one other brother and one sister, and they never attended. And ... and ... and I'm actually the first one in all my family to ... to have obtained my associate's degree, and I'm the only one so far who has done that. There's my other cousins that I have that have attended college, but

they have not finished. So, so far I'm the first one. I want my son to go straight from high school to college.

It is clear that Sandra is invested in breaking the cycle of a lack of education in her family by being the first one to complete a higher education degree. She holds high expectations of her son who, she insisted at the time of the interview, will graduate from college before raising a family to avoid the same mistake she made of dropping out of high school when she was a teenager.

Another participant, Daniela, expressed similar feelings about her motivation to persist with her studies. She explained,

Me being a mom? It's also my drive, the reason for me to want to continue and to not want to give up. As difficult as the classes are, and the lack of sleep that I get and that I have to do my homework at night when everybody goes to bed, I know that I'm doing it for them. They know that there's no ifs, ands, or buts. They will finish high school. They will go to college. And continue their education. I see that my son, he's the oldest, and he's very proud. He tells everybody that his mom's going to school. The little one, as well, tells them, so I see that they are very proud of me for working and managing my time with them and not stopping. School being first. And then they can grow up, have their children, have a family, because that's what stopped me from attending college before, or even pursuing my GED before.

From all these accounts, a common theme expressed by participants illustrates their strong sense of wanting something better for their children. There is a belief that

obtaining a higher education degree should be everyone's main goal before raising a family. The majority of respondents were emphatic about their commitment to their children's education.

Academic Counselors' Insights

Two academic counselors, whose main role is to provide counseling to students who fit the profiles of the participants of this study, were also interviewed. These interviews gathered important information about how the institution's counselors monitor students' academic growth as well as the different referral services participants can access to address personal circumstances that may affect their ability to attend and complete their degree.

One of the counselors, Rosie, who has been an academic counselor for about eight years, self-identifies as Hispanic and is proud to say that she earned an associate's degree from the college many years ago. Nicole, the other academic counselor interviewed, has over ten years of experience in counseling at the community college level, and self-identifies as black. While their primary function as counselors is to guide students through their academic life, both counselors discussed their roles as going beyond the academic realm.

When asked how she approaches her role within the institution, Rosie described her role as that of a coach who helps students get past some of the hurdles they face while trying to navigate the community college system. She said,

It's just letting them know that I was also as confused as they were when they came in to, you know, start. That college is a maze, but you need to know that sometimes you feel that the light's been turned off, but that's where coming to a counselor and, you know, getting some right information and some right motivation will help you get to your destination. And so you need a coach.

Someone who is going to guide you, get you to the winning side, and you may, there are going to be times when you think that's not going to happen, that you're just going to quit the game.

Rosie discussed the notion that telling students she was once one of them gives them confidence. Students seem to become less intimidated by the complexities of navigating the college system when Rosie tells them she was also confused when she started college. Rosie shares some of her stories with her students not only to help them relax, but also to allow for a more personal interaction in which students are comfortable sharing their own issues with her. Developing a relationship with those she coaches is crucial. Unfortunately, students are not always assigned to the same counselor, which prevents them from building a more supportive role.

Nicole was emphatic about her role in fostering students' persistence in college. She assists students in establishing their career goals before they begin to design their degree plans. When asked how she saw her role in influencing students to persist in completing their degrees, Nicole observed,

My role is, I believe, very, very significant to persistence in that the bureaucratic process that a student has to go through can be complex for them, especially

where we are, where we mainly have, our major population is mainly first-generation college students, heavily minority-based at this particular institution, being a metropolitan community college. so my role is really significant in that one, I need to identify with the social class, really, that ... that particular group that I serve into, what their needs are, what the ... especially the social impacts on them outside of their education, that they themselves don't take into consideration. So I feel like it's very important for me to bring clarity or help them to gain clarity in identifying those impacts and helping them, you know, figure out time management. So I believe I play a very, very significant role in helping students to get to the next level. And then even in the academic or educational planning aspect, knowing what classes are a best fit for them to take. So, yeah, I believe we play an extremely important role in persistence. Very much so.

According to Nicole, she plays a very significant role in getting students to the next level. Most students believe they can take many classes at once in order to complete their degrees quickly. Nicole's role is to make them realize that taking too many classes while holding jobs and raising children is very challenging. She explains to them that being eager to complete their degrees at a fast pace is not the best academic path because it increases the chances that they will not be able to cope with taking many classes while managing their daily life duties.

The academic counselors' findings support the participants' accounts under the theme *institutional role in Mexican women's persistence in college*, discussed earlier in

this chapter. More specifically, the subtheme *support services* is directly related to how counselors believe they play a significant role in helping students persist by guiding them through a navigation of the system. It is evident through both participants' and academic counselors' accounts that students struggle when they first enroll in college. They need guidance to navigate the college system, which involves not only learning about the services that are available, but also managing responsibilities. Most participants did not seem to be aware of the steps for registering or how to organize themselves to juggle family, work, and school concurrently. All of the accounts relay the important role of the academic counselors in fostering persistence and college degree completion.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence in completing an associate's degree at a community college in the Southeastern region of Texas. Four research questions guided this study: (a) What role do two-year higher education institutions play in facilitating degree completion by female Mexican GED graduates in the United States? (b) How does their gender influence Mexican women's participation in postsecondary education? (c) What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their pursuit of postsecondary education? (d) How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

This chapter is organized into five sections. The first section provides a brief summary of the study. The second section discusses the conclusions drawn from the findings and relates them to the existing literature. The third section presents the implications of this study for theory, practice, and policy. The fourth section provides recommendations for further research. The fifth section closes with some concluding thoughts.

Summary of the Study

“When you want something so bad, you can always do it.” Mexican Women Journeying From the GED to Community College Graduate in a Southwestern State is a qualitative research study set in southeast Texas. A basic interpretive approach was employed to capture the interpretations and meanings of participants’ reflections on their educational experiences and trajectories. Face-to-face in-depth interviews, the primary data collection source, were conducted with twelve female Mexican GED graduates who were in their second year of postsecondary education at the time of the interviews. Purposeful sampling and criterion sampling were utilized to select the participants for this study. Additionally, two secondary data collection sources were used for the study: interviews with two academic counselors from the institution, and institutional data showing student demographics.

This study employed Creswell’s (2007) data analysis method by organizing data through a coding process of separating data into meaningful segments and naming these according to their main focus. The resulting themes, which were the most prominent topics discussed in the interviews, were then categorized into subthemes.

The twelve participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 40. Although they all came from Mexico, they self-identified variously as Hispanics, as Mexicans, as Mexican-Americans, and as Latinas. Of the twelve participants, only three were married at the time of the interviews. Nine were working while attending college. The participants shared several reasons for withdrawing from high school: they had become pregnant, they were too old to enroll in high school when they arrived from Mexico, they

had moved from foster home to foster home, they had been bullied, and they had been molested at home. Eleven participants used financial aid to pay for their college education.

Transcripts from the audio-recorded interviews were analyzed and revealed the following themes: (a) *institutional role in Mexican women's persistence in college*, (b) *barriers to education*, (c) *cultural identity*, and (d) *indicators of persistence*. The theme *institutional role in Mexican women's persistence in college* and its subthemes, *teacher support* and *supportive services*, emerged to answer the first research question. The theme *barriers to education* and its subthemes, *pregnancy while attending high school*, *financing postsecondary education*, and *impact of gender on completing a postsecondary degree*, related to the second research question. The theme *cultural identity* and its subthemes, *family views of education* and *impact of cultural values on postsecondary educational pursuit* addressed the third research question. The theme *indicators of persistence* and its subthemes, *intrinsic motivation* and *example for children*, unfolded as answers to the fourth research question.

Conclusions

Four major conclusions were derived from the findings reported in Chapter 4. The first concerns the significant role that the institution played in the participants' academic lives. The second concerns gender influences and their impact on the lives of the women in the study. The third concerns the importance of family views of education and cultural values as factors contributing to the study participants' degree completion.

The fourth concerns the main coping strategies utilized by the women in this study, along with the main reason they persisted through degree completion.

Conclusion 1

Research Question 1: What role do community colleges play in facilitating degree completion by female Mexican GED graduates in the United States?

The findings from the primary and secondary data sources suggest that postsecondary educational institutions play a significant role in facilitating degree completion by female Mexican GED graduates. Participants in this study discussed the importance of having supportive teachers: Such teachers were essential in contributing to their successful college experience. Moreover, supportive services such as counseling, financial aid, and childcare had a great impact on the participants' persistence in completing their degrees. Adult learners are more likely to persist when they feel their teachers show concern and are consistently available to help them while they are enrolled. Adult learners' persistence can be linked to the support and availability of their teachers to guide them through their classes (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Naretto, 1995). Teachers' concern for how students were progressing in their classes was cited by the majority of the participants as one of the main reasons for their ability to persist in college. For instance, when one participant's teenage son passed away, her teachers were extremely kind and supportive, allowing her to submit homework late and to miss classes as she dealt with her son's passing.

Additionally, participants viewed counseling as a crucial supportive service provided by the college. The women in the study found it challenging to understand how to navigate the college system. They often found themselves needing help in registering for classes, applying for financial aid, learning about childcare availability, and making decisions regarding their majors. Previous research shows that the importance of counseling should not be underestimated, because students gain trust in an institution as they become more comfortable in the college environment (De Leon, 2005; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). This holds especially true for the participants in this study, who faced challenges such as unfamiliarity with the American college system, time constraints, and lack of financial resources in most cases.

The findings in response to the first research question support Tinto's persistence theory. According to Tinto (1997), "the greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills" (p. 600). In other words, students who engage with faculty in the classroom and outside of it will not only develop their skills to a higher level, but will also be more likely to persist and complete their degrees. Even though most of this study's participants did not have a relationship with their teachers outside of the classroom, their interactions with their teachers within the classroom walls were engaging enough to support them through degree completion.

In discussing college persistence among Hispanic students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) highlighted the key factors that higher education institutions should focus on to foster persistence and degree completion, including faculty involvement and

concern for students, peer interaction, and institutional concern for student development. While the findings of the present study suggest that teacher support and institutional support services such as counseling and tutoring contributed significantly to the participants' persistence, more needs to be done to ensure that a greater number of disadvantaged students are able to persist and complete their degrees. In 2008, Santiago reported that only 30% of the Hispanics who entered college between 1995 and 2001 had earned a bachelor's or an associate's degree. It is evident that Hispanic immigrants who enter college are less likely than white students to earn a degree, given the myriad of challenges they face (Adelman, 2005; Camarota, 2007; Cross, 1981).

In addressing the low percentage of Hispanics who persist in college long enough to earn a degree, researchers have suggested an array of programs that higher education institutions should implement. Porter, Chase, Comings, and Cuban (2005) suggested that programs must directly address students' personal barriers and participation, as well as improve instructional services. Additionally, higher education institutions should implement campus practices that have proven successful, such as sharing data about Hispanic students with faculty and staff, using short-term measures of academic progress to improve curricula, instruction, and support services, encouraging and supporting the sharing of disaggregated student data between community colleges and baccalaureate-granting institutions, and partnering with other educational organizations in the community to align educational resources (Santiago, 2008b).

In this connection, the findings that emerged in Chapter 4 show that participants counted on their teachers' involvement in order to do well in college. Moreover, there

was a consensus that institutional support services such as counseling and financial aid are vital factors that contribute to students' persistence and degree completion. Implementing campus practices that have been successful at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) such as the one in this study can help this particular group of disadvantaged students complete their degrees.

Conclusion 2

Research Question 2: How does their gender influence Mexican women's participation in postsecondary education?

The findings in this study reveal that becoming pregnant while attending high school was a contributing factor in participants' decisions to withdraw. Moreover, pregnancy at an early age had a major impact on how long it took the women in the study to complete their educational pursuits. In addition to pregnancy, gender and financial challenges emerged when respondents were asked how being female influenced their participation in postsecondary education.

Five of the twelve women in the study confirmed that they had to quit high school because they became pregnant. Thus, almost half of the participants in the study faced this barrier to completing their education—simply because of the fact that they are biologically women capable of becoming pregnant and giving birth. According to a report published by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2009, the high school dropout rate for Latino students is 17%, while it is 9% for black students and 6% for whites. These numbers show that Latinos drop out of high school almost twice as often as black

students and almost three times as often as white students. In addition, for Latinas there is a 10% higher risk of dropping out of high school because of pregnancy than for white female students (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011).

Furthermore, Harris and Allgood (2009) observe that between 1990 and 2006, birth rates declined least for Hispanic (15%) adolescents attending high school, while it declined most for African American adolescents (31%). Women who give birth before they reach the age of twenty are more likely to live in poverty than women who postpone childbearing until their twenties (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2009). Therefore, not completing high school because of teen pregnancy can greatly affect the educational trajectories as well as the financial situation of these women and their families.

When asked how being a woman had impacted their educational experience, participants identified themselves as strong and capable human beings who can take on the challenges of life as they navigate their way to completion of a postsecondary degree while playing multiple societal roles. They are mothers, wives, daughters, workers, and students. Yet their determination to succeed to provide a better future for themselves and their children drives them to face and overcome the daily challenges of these multi-layered and complicated lives.

Financial challenges were a second major barrier that emerged from the interviews. Eleven of the twelve participants used financial aid to get through college. Having to support their children and pay for college was very challenging for most of these

women, who emphasized that without financial aid they would not have been able to afford college.

Conclusion 3

Research Question 3: What role does the cultural identity of Mexican women in the United States play in their pursuit of postsecondary education?

It can be argued that cultural identity plays a significant role in the individuals' educational trajectories. The findings from the participant interviews suggest that family views of education and cultural values had a positive impact on their educational pursuits.

In discussing their coping strategies for remaining in school while working and taking care of their children, most of the participants emphasized the support they received from their parents and other family members. Overall research findings to date indicate that support and encouragement from family members are positively related to college access and success among Hispanic students (Jeynes, 2007; Newgent, Lee, & Daniel, 2007; Sokatch, 2006). While participants' family members were encouraging and supportive about their education and in some cases treated it as an outright priority, it is fair to say that family support was limited by a lack of knowledge that might have helped participants enroll in classes and apply for financial aid (Graff, McCain, & Gomez-Vilchis, 2013). Additionally, Gonzalez, Stein and Huq (2013) point out that if the students' parents are not familiar with the U.S. educational system, students may be left with little guidance on how to fit in and become comfortable within the school

environment. Even though a great majority of the participants' parents had not completed high school, they had made education a priority as they raised their daughters. Yet their contribution to their daughters' education was limited by their own inability to understand the American college system and by their lack of English language proficiency.

In addition to family views of education, the study findings suggest that the cultural values of respondents' families had a significant impact on their postsecondary degree completion. When asked to describe how their cultural values supported and/or challenged their college experience, answers varied widely. Some participants spoke about the stereotype attached to the Mexican culture of their grandmothers' generation, according to which women should stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. Although such stereotypical behavior still exists in a few of the respondents' households, this study's findings suggest that the Mexican culture has shifted somewhat within the last two generations. Yet those who grew up in an interracial environment usually felt supported by one parent, but not the other. These women were sometimes conflicted by their parents' cultural differences throughout their years of upbringing.

Conclusion 4

Research Question 4: How do Mexican immigrant women in the United States persist in their two-year college studies?

Intrinsic motivation and serving as an example for their children were the two main answers that emerged when participants were asked to discuss their reasons for

persisting through postsecondary degree completion. The findings suggest that individual resilience played a significant role in the perseverance of these women in completing their degrees.

Remarkably, all women in the study showed individual resilience as they overcame many barriers to remaining in school through degree completion. Financial challenges, a lack of resources to take care of their children, an undocumented status, unsupportive family members, and pregnancy were the main obstacles discussed by participants. Yet they proved themselves resilient, with the common goal of wanting a better life for themselves and their families. According to Campa (2010), Mexican college students' resilience is linked to a larger purpose directly connected to their families, which becomes the stimulus that drives them to succeed. Therefore, intrinsic motivation, as shown by most participants of this study, supports resilience theory, with resilience defined as "the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors" (Kaplan et al., 1996). The women in this study were determined to succeed in their educational pursuit. Their drive to improve their lives and that of their children came from within.

Another key finding reported in Chapter 4 was the responsibility participants felt to be good examples for their children. Earning a degree was very important to the women in the study because they wanted to set an example for their children. Many reported that one of their main priorities as mothers was to make sure their children earned college degrees. The participants strived to balance their multiple roles as

mothers, workers, and students to demonstrate to their children how to follow their dreams and accomplish their goals.

Providing a different life trajectory for their children by behaving responsibly is a journey that many Latinas take when they realize the many educational opportunities that are available in the United States (Graff, McCain, & Gomez-Vilchis, 2013). The study participants had a strong desire not only to provide a better life for their children, but also to instill in them how important it is to obtain a higher education degree. Some even discussed how proud their children were of them.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

To my knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the trajectories of female Mexican GED graduates to postsecondary degree completion. Based on the findings of this study and the literature reviewed, the implications of this study will now be discussed. The findings have implications in the field of adult education as it relates to theory, practice, and policy.

Implications for Theory

Persistence and resilience theories were the two conceptual frameworks used in this study. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model of persistence was designed primarily for white students, generally discounting the specific characteristics of nonwhite students. The model emphasizes the integration of students into college life, but does not account for cultural differences and the isolation students from different ethnic backgrounds

might experience while trying to fit into the “one size fits all” situation. Although the benefits of teacher support constituted one of the major findings of this study, supporting Tinto’s model as it relates to faculty involvement in students’ lives, eleven of the twelve participants were not involved in college activities outside of the classroom. The great majority of women in the study did not become involved in the life of the college beyond the classroom, yet they still managed to complete their degrees because they felt supported enough by their teachers to persist through completion.

Resilience theory addresses the strength individuals and systems possess and use to overcome adversity. The women in this study developed their own internal mechanisms to face many obstacles by developing coping skills, which are an integral part of resilience theory (Morales & Trotman, 2004; VanBreda, 2001). Therefore, the findings support resilience theory as it directly relates to the individual resilience the participants demonstrated in order to accomplish their educational goals.

The findings of this study demonstrate that persistence and resilience theories are interconnected. In this study, it was the resilience of the women that helped them to persist in their educational pursuits. Furthermore, participants’ accounts of perseverance and individual resilience indicate that when institutional and personal forces are combined, there is an increase in goal achievement. In other words, if faculty support and other supportive services are provided in addition to participants exhibiting intrinsic motivation, retention, and thereby completion of an associates’ degree are more likely to take place.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have provided valuable insights into the trajectories of Mexican women who hold a GED credential to postsecondary degree completion. According to the participants in the study, there were many barriers to attending college and completing a two-year degree. Yet these barriers did not prevent them from completing their degrees. The active role the institution took to ensure that students were fully engaged in their academic pursuit was crucial.

Faculty involvement was another key area discussed by participants. The women in the study felt that the emotional and academic support they received from their teachers was vital. Faculty and college administrators alike should focus on Mexican female students' unique characteristics to fully understand their background, needs, and responsibilities outside of school, as well as their commitment to earning a college degree. Key stakeholders should become aware that for most of these students, feeling "at home" by interacting outside of the classroom with faculty and peers is one of the main factors contributing to their persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students in this study felt they mattered when their teachers showed how much they cared and were willing to help them succeed in degree completion. Therefore, colleges should develop mentorship programs that support such initiatives with the purpose of increasing retention of this underrepresented group of students.

Implications for Policy

This study's findings have several implications for policy, if community colleges are invested in increasing the number of Mexican women graduates. One major finding that should be taken into consideration when encouraging this particular group of students to attend college is the need for their teachers to mentor them. Policy makers should create programs that support, and perhaps reward, faculty who engage in mentoring activities. It is through this type of support that students feel a sense of belonging and continue to attend college beyond the first year, as the women in this study did.

Another key area policy makers need to focus on is the importance of transition programs within the institution to serve as support systems. While the women in the study eventually completed their two-year degrees, this was in part accomplished due to their individual resilience. If funds are allocated to support counselors to work more closely with students like the women in this study, graduation rates have the potential to increase.

Additionally, community college policy makers should collect and disseminate data that will not only inform faculty and administrators, but also assist them in tailoring their programs to this underserved student population. Community colleges should collaborate and become more data-driven to provide viable ways for low-income minority students to pursue postsecondary education. Initiatives such as "Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count" have helped increase the utilization of data to enhance students' retention (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Such research studies focus on

collecting data to help increase retention of and degree completion by underrepresented students such as students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study demonstrated that Mexican women who are high-school dropouts and GED graduates can overcome a myriad of obstacles and persist in higher education long enough to complete a two-year degree. Although circumstances varied greatly amongst the participants, all of them showed the necessary resilience to accomplish their goals.

Although this study was set at a large community college in Texas, the participants' demographics are found throughout the United States. California, New York, Florida, and Illinois are some of the states that have high concentrations of Mexican-born immigrants. In an effort to encourage these individuals to pursue higher education, research that focuses on developing and implementing programs dealing more specifically with this underrepresented group should be set in place. Programs such as Latinas Juntas (Latina women together) should be replicated and expanded, to not only provide a day-long orientation, but also to counsel and support these women through their postsecondary educational journey.

The findings of this study point to several areas in need of further research. First, as Mexicans are the largest Hispanic group in the United States, there is a need for more research in general that focuses specifically on Mexicans. Second, and more specifically, there is a need for a larger-scale investigation of Mexican women who once failed to

stay in school but eventually earned a postsecondary degree. Third, the findings of this study indicate that future research done using cultural capital theory would be of benefit to all stakeholders.

Concluding Thoughts

This study shows that Mexican women who immigrate to the United States face an array of obstacles to completing their postsecondary degrees. Consequently, a very small number of those who enroll are able to persist long enough to earn a degree that will potentially improve their lives and the lives of their families.

It is my wish in the last few lines of this dissertation to return to the women. They are the heartbeat of this study. I want to bring this study to a close by again mentioning their names and their resilience and optimism. In spite of being molested by her own father, Mary persisted in her education. In spite of becoming pregnant while attending high school, Angela, Christina, Daniela, and Kyla completed their higher education degrees. In spite of being frequently moved from one foster home to another during childhood, Lisa persevered. And in spite of having to quit high school to help her parents financially, Sandra later continued her education and succeeded. The stories told by the women in this study clearly reveal their resilience and strong determination to improve their lives and those of their families by pursuing and completing their postsecondary degrees. Whether it took them two years or ten from the time they received their GED credentials to the time they graduated from college, they showed intrinsic motivation to succeed and remarkable courage in doing so.

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APPENDIX A
"SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
(STUDENT)

Interview Protocol - Students

Mexican women: from the GED to postsecondary
completion in a large college in Texas

Participant Background, Educational History, & Employment Status

1. How do you self-identify racially? How do you self-identify ethnically?
2. Where were you born?
3. How long have you lived in the United States?
4. What is your marital status?
5. What is your spouse's educational background?

<input type="checkbox"/> Less than high school	<input type="checkbox"/> Some high school
<input type="checkbox"/> Graduated high school	<input type="checkbox"/> Vocational School
<input type="checkbox"/> Some college	<input type="checkbox"/> College Graduate
6. Do you have any children? If so, what are their ages?
7. What is your age range?

<input type="checkbox"/> 18-25	<input type="checkbox"/> 26-30
<input type="checkbox"/> 31-35	<input type="checkbox"/> 36-40
<input type="checkbox"/> 41-45	<input type="checkbox"/> 46-50
8. Are you currently employed?
9. While you were preparing for your GED, were you employed?
10. (If employed) Do you think you are using any of the skills you gained during
your GED at your job?

11. Tell me about the circumstances surrounding your withdrawal from high school?
12. Why did you decide to take the GED?
13. Did you take GED preparatory classes? If, so how do you think they helped you to obtain your GED?

Questions regarding GED and GED Preparatory Classes

14. Why did you decide to attend GED preparatory classes?
15. Describe your experience during your GED preparatory program?
16. How long did it take you to obtain your GED?
17. Was there ever a time you felt like stopping out of the GED preparatory classes?
18. (If stopped out) For how long did you stop out?
19. (If stopped out) What/Who made you decide to return and continue?
20. How did the GED program help you to enroll in college?
21. Can you name people and/or systems in your life that encouraged you to obtain the GED?
22. Describe the challenges you faced while attending GED preparatory classes.

Questions regarding postsecondary experience

23. What were some of the barriers you faced when you first enrolled in college?
24. Describe the college support services you have utilized. How have they helped you to persist?
25. How are you financing your college education?
26. Have you ever stopped out? For how long?
27. If yes, why? If no, have you ever considered?

28. If yes, what made you return?
29. How many classes are you taking (on average) per semester?
30. Describe your interaction with the staff and administration in all the support areas (financial aid, counseling, academic advising, student services etc.)
31. Describe your interaction with your professors/teachers?
32. Would you be able to describe your most supportive teacher? Service provider?
33. Name people and or systems that have supported you to remain in college.
34. In what kind of extra-curricular activities have you become involved?
35. (If yes or no) Do you think that has made a difference in your college experience?
36. What are some of your favorite things about being a student?
37. What are some of your least favorite things about being a student?

Questions regarding cultural, family and gender issues

38. How was education viewed by your family members when you were growing up?
39. Was there any difference from male and female perspectives?
40. Did your mother graduate from high school?
41. Are you the first in your family to attend college?
42. (If yes) Where/who does the pressure come from? Describe how you are handling it.
43. How do you think that your gender has made an impact on your educational experience?

- 44. (If mother) How do you think that your being a mom has impacted your educational experience?
- 45. (If a mother) How do you think your children feel about you going to college?
- 46. (If a mother) What do you hope for your children to learn from your educational experiences and journey?
- 47. How do you feel you have changed since you enrolled in college?
- 48. Can you describe how your cultural values have supported and/or challenged your college experience?

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
(ACADEMIC COUNSELORS)

Interview Protocol – Academic Counselor

Mexican women: from the GED to postsecondary completion in a large college in Texas

Background

1. What is your role at the institution?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. How do you self-identify racially? How do you self-identify ethnically?
4. Educational background (e.g., degree and certifications).
5. Describe your interaction with students.
6. How do you see your role influencing students' persistence to complete their degrees?
7. How does this role change based on the student's ethnic/social background?

Demographic Data

8. What kind of demographic data can you provide on students?
 - a. # GED graduates currently pursuing a postsecondary degree
 - i. How many of these are women?
 - ii. What is the average age/age range of these GED graduates?

Questions regarding services and students' progress

9. Can you describe the services you offer at the college to support Hispanic and/or Mexican women in completing their postsecondary degree?

10. What services not provided by the college are the most common needed by students?
11. How do you monitor the academic growth of students?
12. Do students come to you voluntarily? If no, how do you track them to monitor their progress?
13. If a student is considering stopping out, how do you work with that student to prevent that from happening?
14. What is the percentage of female students you counsel as opposed to male?
15. What kinds of issues female Hispanic students most commonly face when attending college?
16. What do you think are some of the barriers your students face that keep them from staying in programs long enough to reach their educational goals?
17. What do you think are some strategies that help students to succeed in reaching their educational goals?

Academic Counselor's Insights

18. During your time in this role, have you seen any trends related to GED graduates transitioning to degree programs?
19. What insights do you have as an academic counselor into the educational trajectories of GED graduates who have completed a postsecondary degree at the college?
20. Any specific insights related to Hispanic and/or Mexican women?

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT TO OBTAIN INFORMED CONSENT

(STUDENTS)

Project Title: Mexican Women: From the GED to Postsecondary Completion in a Large College in Texas

You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Texas A&M University. You are being asked to read this form so that you know about this research study. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part in the research. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefit you normally would have.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence to complete an associate's degree in a two-year higher education institution in the Southwestern region of the United States.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You are being asked to be in this study because you have been identified as a Mexican woman, GED graduate, and English proficient; who is currently in your second year of a two-year degree at a higher education institution.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

There will be a total of 15 participants.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The alternative is not to participate.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?

The participants will be asked to respond to open-ended questions from an interview protocol. This interview process will last between 45 to 60 minutes.

WILL VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDINGS BE MADE OF ME DURING THE STUDY?

Yes, the participants' responses will be audio recorded.

Optional recordings:

The researcher will make an audio recording during the study so that the data may be transcribed in order to support the research only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

_____ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

_____ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

The things that you will be doing have no more risk than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researcher has tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

There is no direct benefit to you by being in this study. What the researchers find out from this study may help other people with societal benefit.

WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO ME?

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

WILL I BE PAID TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

WILL INFORMATION FROM THIS STUDY BE KEPT PRIVATE?

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Renata Ferreira Russo (PI) will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

WHOM CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

You can call the Principal Investigator to tell him/her about a concern or complaint about this research study. The Principal Investigator Renata Ferreira Russo (Doctoral student) can be called at 713-893-7074 or emailed at russo@neo.tamu.edu

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research and cannot reach the Principal Investigator or

want to talk to someone other than the Investigator, you may call the Texas A&M Human Subjects Protection Program office.

- Phone number: (979) 458-4067
- Email: irb@tamu.edu

MAY I CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT PARTICIPATING?

You have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide not to participate or stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc. You can stop being in this study at any time with no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc.

Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. A copy of this entire, signed consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE INSTRUMENT TO OBTAIN INFORMED CONSENT

(ACADEMIC COUNSELORS)

Project Title: Mexican Women: From the GED to Postsecondary Completion in a Large College in Texas

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WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to examine the internal (personal) and external (institutional) factors that influence female Mexican GED graduates' persistence to complete an associate's degree in a two-year higher education institution in the Southwestern region of the United States.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You are being asked to be in this study because you have been identified as an academic counselor at the institution where participants are currently attending classes.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE ASKED TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

There will be a total of 15 participants and one academic counselor.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The alternative is not to participate.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IN THIS STUDY?

The participants will be asked to respond to open-ended questions from an interview protocol. This interview process will last between 45 to 60 minutes.

WILL VIDEO OR AUDIO RECORDINGS BE MADE OF ME DURING THE STUDY?

Yes, the participants' responses will be audio recorded.

Optional recordings:

The researcher will make an audio recording during the study so that the data may be transcribed in order to support the research only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

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ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

The things that you will be doing have no more risk than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researcher has tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

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WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO ME?

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Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

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For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research and cannot reach the Principal Investigator or

want to talk to someone other than the Investigator, you may call the Texas A&M Human Subjects Protection Program office.

- Phone number: (979) 458-4067
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MAY I CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT PARTICIPATING?

You have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide not to participate or stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, there will be no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc. You can stop being in this study at any time with no effect on your student status, medical care, employment, evaluation, etc.

Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. A copy of this entire, signed consent form will be given to me.

Participant's Signature

Date

Printed Name

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

Signature of Presenter

Date

Printed Name

Date